

Blithe Spirit



Journal of
The British Haiku Society

Volume 6 Number 1 February 1996

Blithe Spirit Volume 6 Number 1

February 1996

Contents

Editorial		Page	3
Autumn			4
Museum of Haiku Literature Award			6
Scots Haiku			7
From 'Kobe Quake'	Mokuo Nagayama		8
Haiku			9
The Pathway			14
Favourite Haiku 1			15
The Senses in Bashō	Bill Wyatt		16
Favourite Haiku 2			17
Senryu			18
The Senses			21
Zen-less Haiku	Colin Blundell		23
Reviews			27
Guest Spot			32

Blithe Spirit

Journal of the British Haiku Society

Editor: Jackie Hardy

Submissions for all but **The Pathway** section to:-

Jackie Hardy, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Submissions for **The Pathway** section only to:-

David Cobb, Sinodun, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Annual membership of the British Haiku Society (standard subscription in the UK £12.50, £9 concessionary; £15 overseas, surface mail, or £18 airmail) includes 4 issues of **Blithe Spirit**. Subscriptions to magazine only — £7 a year UK, £9 overseas. Enquiries about subscriptions or membership to: The Membership Secretary, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

The Editor welcomes submissions of poetry and articles by members of the British Haiku Society (non-members may submit for **The Pathway** section), on the understanding that these are not simultaneously under consideration elsewhere. Please provide publication details of any item submitted which has already appeared in print. Copyright reverts to the author upon publication in **Blithe Spirit**. Please enclose a stamped addressed envelope or IRC with each submission.

Blithe Spirit welcomes, and exists as a forum for, diverse statements about the writing and appreciation of haiku and kindred forms of verse. The Editor takes entire responsibility for the selection of items for publication.

Blithe Spirit is published four times a year, cover-dated February, May, August, November.

Officers: James Kirkup (President), Susan Rowley (Chair), David Cobb (General Secretary & Treasurer), Richard Goring (Librarian & Hackett Award), Martin Lucas (Events), Jackie Hardy (Editor, **Blithe Spirit**), Caroline Gourlay (Membership Secretary), Annie Bachini (The Brief)

Editorial

Volume 6 Number 1 of **Blithe Spirit** sees us, more or less, back on track. It seems the last issue was not only late but bedevilled with errors. Thank you to those who wrote pointing out the deficiencies. To those who suffered but did not write, an even bigger thank you. Apologies to all.

The front cover of this volume has been designed by Patricia V Dawson. Each year we change the design so we are always looking for people with talent in this area to send appropriate images.

This is the year of the rat and the rat or other rodents will be the subject of the theme for the next issue. Please avoid furry creatures of the Walt Disney type. I intend to go for the sort of thing that inhabits Room 101.

Later in the year, in line with the opinion of those who have made it known, I intend to hand over Number 3 to the guest editorship of Richard Goring. Richard has agreed to edit a special tanka issue and because of this no tanka will appear in this or the next issue of **Blithe Spirit**. Any tanka received from now on will be passed on to Richard. This gives you all plenty of time to experiment, improve and perfect.

Most of you who wrote approved the change of headings. To make it quite clear: your contribution will appear under the headings of **Haiku** or **Senryu** if they are not for the theme or seasonal sections. I still want you to send appropriate seasonal submissions. They will be published, not under the title 'Season Corner', but under the name of the season. The season for the next issue is **Winter**.

Jackie Hardy

Erratum (Volume 5 Number 4)

Dee Evetts' pig haiku should have read:-

slap of my hand
raising dust
from the pig's back

Autumn

untangling fishing-line
swallow rehearsing
tomorrow's flight plan

Douglas Henly

evening chill
a late september sun
on tarnished silver

David Steele

Thru September's rain
crows returning to their nest —
my thoughts drift with them

Bill Wyatt

autumn stillness
a falling leaf
startles the cat

Byron Jackson

swallows gone ...
silence deepens
under the eaves

a mountain cottage —
night fog creeps in
through unseen slits

Kohjin Sakamoto

my umbrella
records each passing tree —
grey background drizzle

November rain;
roadside rose hips
brighter...
brighter

D.J. Peel

Sick horse — one hind leg
keeps kicking, kicking the long
autumn night away

Makoto Tamaki

Wind tears an old web
insect husks spin off
in a last brief flight

Edward D Glover

rising and falling
with each gust of wind —
the severed leaves

Annie Bachini

October wind
a paper bag soars
over the allotments

Fred Schofield

On this Autumn day
looking its best —
the peeling paintwork

John Shimmin

first morning of frost —
steaming into the sunshine
a cat's yawn

David Cobb

Museum of Haiku Literature Award

The Editor chooses Nika's

this winter night
my only company
an unknown star

I admire this haiku very much. Although it is far from essential, there is something particularly satisfying about a balanced haiku — in this case 4/6/4 syllables. Look at the work the vowels do. Each 'i' in 'this winter night' tight enough to make you hunch your shoulders against the cold. Followed by the expansiveness of the 'o', 'a' and 'y' sounds in line two, until we have reached the limits of the cosmos with the long 'a', 'o' and 'u' of line three. In this haiku of splendid isolation the irony of 'an unknown star' for 'company' is masterful.

*

I have asked Kohjin Sakamoto to choose from this issue.

Scots Haiku

The following are Scots versions based on Makoto Ueda's translations of haiku by Japanese poets living in the twentieth century. They are by David Purves, editor of 'Lallans', the journal of the Scots Language Society.

He says a word
and I say a word — autumn
is deepening.

He says a wurd
an A say a wurd — the nichts
is drawin in.

(Takahama Kyoshi 1874-1959)

A winter hornet
without a place to die
staggers along.

A back end wesp
wi naewhaur ti dee
stoiters alang.

(Murakami Kijo 1865-1938)

My runny nose:
everywhere except on its dewdrop
evening dusk falls.

Ma rinnie neb:
awhaur, binna on its dewdrap,
dounfaws the gloamin.

(Akutagawa Ryunosuke 1892-1927)

Its sight has been lost
and yet, for that eye also
I polish a glass.

Its sicht is tint
but for aw, for that ee anaw
A polish a gless.

(Hino Sōjō 1901-1956)

Into my midday nap
again and again, someone
hammers a nail.

Intil ma dover at nuin,
aye an again, sumbodie
hemmers a nail.

(Yamaguchi Seishi b 1901)

Strong are the youngsters
even on a day when onions
rot on the dry beach.

Strang ir the bairns
even the day ingans
daise, on the freuchie brae.

(Kaneko Tōta b 1919)

The following is a haiku-like excerpt 'found' by David Purves in a recent poem, *Ballantrae Kirkyaird*, by Lilian Anderson:-

A burd i the sounless air
unkennin o' men's dreams
kennin its ain sang.

From 'Kobe Quake' (Haisen Sequence) Mokuo Nagayama

Grandpa's household shrine
keeps a fallen beam
inches above grandma

A battered building's
sign lost a letter
another meaning

A blanketed boy
forgetting even his name
squats by the roadside

A dead old clock
begins ticking
at 5.46

Haiku

telescopic sight —
a heron
spreading its wings

Norman Barraclough

Birdwatching

identity crisis

Where the path stops
my shadow doing something
in the bushes

As the rain ends
once more the drip
of the tap

George Swede

back home
all we had taken
unpacked

Frank Dullaghan

dogbarkcuckoocallcramp
the first moment
of a new day

David Cobb

in the corridor
of the Catholic school
a tray of *wandering jews*

Fred Schofield

showers of snow
pick out the greenest fields
december morning

Matt Morden

Pavilion empty
the old Shanghai gardener
dances with herself

Spider climbs the sky,
and then centres within
the evening glow...

James W Hackett

To be able to walk
To the hills of Takao
From a vegetable patch
By a lake.

I will show you something —
One above the other,
Two evening stars setting
In a cleft of the hills.

Tito

In the snow her boot prints
perfect
mile after mile

Ken Jones

swimming
in the toilet bowl:
a ladybird

Martin Lucas

Down the chimney
First a pigeon's cooing
Then a crust of bread

Charging the ramblers —
A playful cow, her forehead
Stuck with burrs

Cicely Hill

A plane in the clouds
drones on long after
it is out of sight

Katherine Gallagher

slow London train —
picking up speed
past Mortlake cemetery

D.J. Peel

galaxies tremble
as a whirligig beetle
scoots the midnight pond

August heatwave —
gulls in new winter plumage
white-headed

George Marsh

Rooks
On the bare branches —
Black Christmas baubles

Jem T Stedman

almost lost
in the shimmer on water
several ducklings

Alan J Summers

A wet morning
on the washed kitchen floor
cat's muddy paw prints

Joan Daniels

wake —
penetrating the dark air
fragrance of narcissus

Yoko Ogino

age-old game
from the bridge
new twigs

honeysuckle arch
last year's new timber
already greying

Richard Goring

alighting
on creamy whorls of kale
a little bird

Tsunehiko Hoshino

between dark and dark
only a narrow crevice...
the mouse creeps in

Kathleen Basford

long after
my mother has passed away...
her chiming clock

Janice Bostok

heatwave...
the winterwear catalogue
brings on a sweat

Dee Evetts

two cartoon characters
their thought bubbles are filling
with the warmth of tea...

Linda Marshall

The Pathway

The haiku poet Mirsad Denjo was killed at Mostar in Herzegovina on 30th June 1993 aged 41, a civilian victim of the Bosnian civil war. His compatriot Marinko Spanovic tells us he collected medicinal herbs and was influenced by Issa. The following haiku by Denjo have been translated into English by Gordana Valand, with some minor editing by The Pathway editor.

Kavka žega!
Mrtvog mrava nosi mrav
kroz kamenjar.

What heat!
An ant is carrying a dead ant
through the scorching rocks.

Pismo iz daleka ..
Na njivi zaboravljena
leži motika.

Letter from abroad ..
Forgotten on the field
the hoe.

S mladom travom
razlepršao se u polju
pijetlov rep.

Young grass
fluttering full of zest
the cockerel's tail.

Kako zavija pas!
Jesu li živa moja braća
na ratištu?

Ah, a dog howls!
Are my brothers alive
on the battlefield?

Moji vrapci
i vrapci iz susjedstva ..
Koliko vrabaca!

My sparrows and
all my neighbours' sparrows ..
So many sparrows!

Ratar na časak
prekida oranje ..
Pogrebna glazba.

Just for a while
the farmer halts his plough ..
for the funeral.

Nema slavuja —
pjesma žaba sad je
još tužnija.

Zajedno broje
ujede komaraca
djed i unuk.

Trave govore
što mrtvi ne mogu.
Groblje ne brdu.

Dragi vrapci
i ne znate da sam mamuran
od sinoćnjeg vina.

Na proljetnoj kiši
skinuo se do pojasa
maleni puž.

Tolika Neretva
a sva prode uskim
kanjonom ..

There is no nightingale —
now the frog's song is getting
even sadder.

Grandpa and grandson
together counting
their mosquito bites.

Grasses entrust us
with things the dead can't say.
Graveyard on a hill.

Dear sparrows, do you know
I'm having a hang-over
from last night's wine?

In the spring rain
he has stripped to the waist —
the little snail.

Such a large river —
but the whole Neretva passes
through this narrow gorge.

Favourite Haiku 1

Cold stills bare branches.
The only sound in the wood
carried by the stream

I come back and back to this haiku by Caroline Gurlay. It is a perfect distillation of winter in the country. Stillness and cold prevail over the landscape. In such quietness one hears the smallest sounds like the rustle of an insect or the breaking of a twig or in this case the movement of a stream. In the last line its icy water provides the requisite shiver.

Patricia V Dawson

The Senses in Bashō

Bill Wyatt

Sound

As the sea darkens
the voice of a wild duck
sounds faintly white

Bashō had spent the day on a beach. Dusk approaches, wind whips up the waves. A solitary duck appears & calls out, evoking the loneliness of the sea. In Zen, we say listen with your eyes & look out through your ears. Bashō often used the word 'white' in his haiku when describing something that is cold or chilly. In this particular haiku, he describes what he hears in visual terms, which is most unusual!

Smell

What kind of tree
is flowering? I do not know —
but the fragrance

Bashō wrote this after visiting one of the Shinto shrines at Ise. It is based on a *waka* by Saigyō —

What divinity
is in here, I do
not know, & yet
as my heart reaches out
my tears begin to flow

Whereas Saigyō's *waka* is describing an emotional experience, Bashō goes even further, giving the haiku a much more personal touch.

Touch

My robe of paper
I don't mind if it gets wet
snapping off blossoms

This was written in the form of a greeting poem for Roso, a Shinto priest of Ise.

Sight

I stop & rest
higher than the skylark
on a mountain pass

This is Bashō at his most light-hearted. Expressing, in an almost childlike way, the joy of hearing a skylark singing. Although it is not expressed, we feel & see the vast expanse below him as he stops to rest from his climb.

Taste

Drinking my rice wine
makes it difficult to sleep —
snow falling at night

This haiku has the heading 'A Snowy Night at Fukagawa'. We can imagine Bashō after drinking his sake, tossing & turning in his bed! In fact, it wasn't the wine that kept him awake, but the wonderful scene of snow falling outside.

Favourite Haiku 2

kaki kueba
kane ga narunari
Hōryūji

I bite into a persimmon
and a bell resounds —
Hōryūji

Shiki (tr J. Beichman)

I have a particular fondness for the individual ingredients: monastery bells and persimmons ('95 was an excellent autumn for *kaki*). In bringing them together so nonchalantly Shiki's mastery is supreme. The fruit reveals the flavour of reality; the bell is the heartbeat of the universe. The effect is as shocking as an alarm clock, but infinitely palatable.

Martin Lucas

Senryu

so large at dusk
they argue whether
it is Venus

Janice Bostok

after three years
my neighbour's ranting
almost a lullaby

Dee Evetts

memorable night out
film-plot unknown
still

Douglas Henly

children in the playground
making as much noise
as minutes allow

Katherine Gallagher

Across the river
my neighbour's washing
waving insistently

Ken Jones

Traipsing the city
All her demented questions
Lost in the wind

Cicely Hill

Pointing his banana
young Paul quietly shoots
their sour old neighbour

Edward D Glover

the toddler's hand
opens and closes — stretched towards
oncoming car-light

Annie Bachini

Flood warning
neighbours humping sandbags
introduce themselves

Renga party
after the sixth stanza —
inspirations

John Shimmin

leaves falling —
the shared driveway
suddenly all mine

David Cobb

in the mirror
my son counting
the hairs on his chin

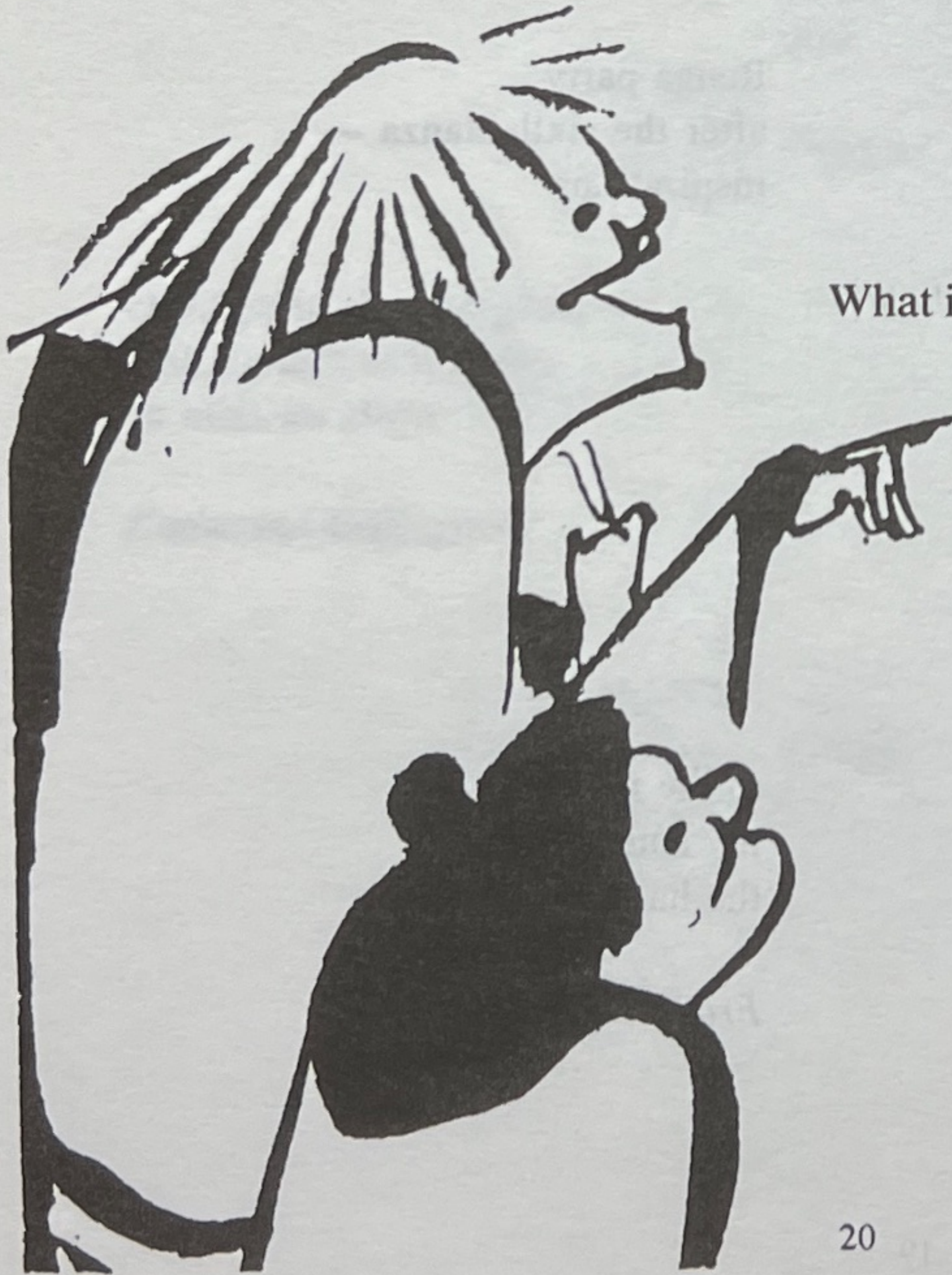
Frank Dullaghan

Deafening waves
old couple
argues anyway

George Swede

A kind man, he wounds
as he agrees with remarks
that he has not heard

Patricia V Dawson



What is the profound message?

Just as a line
of poetry begins to arrive -
mountain rain threatens

The Senses

bend in the footpath
soap bubbles appear
from a hidden garden

Dee Evetts

Buttoning my shirt
as he reads my ECG —
a blackbird singing

John Shimmin

on top of the moor
pissing with the wind —
distant dogbark

Fred Schofield

Standing at my gate
I watch the storm-cloud swelling:
the tyre-dump on fire

W.M. Tidmarsh

Busy arguing
the one-eyed man polishes
both lenses with vigour

Edward D. Glover

winter morning
through my gloves
this cold axe

Byron Jackson

the symphony's
opening bars —
scent of hyacinths

Martin Lucas

on the mountainside,
a rotting sheep's carcass
— memories of war

booking in advance
for her trip to Las Vegas,
Granny touches wood

Charles Brien

l i n g e r i n g
in the subway rush
her perfume

Richard Goring

On the stone floor
umbrellas drip. A cough
finds its echo

Joan Smith

oriental cargo
escaping scent
of star anise

ai li chia

Midnight cigarette —
crackle of smouldering leaf
in ringing silence

Andrew Brown

The fundamentally *neutral* impressions of everyday existence come to us through our senses and go direct to aspects of our personality that mechanically interpret them in accordance with our conventional attitudes, pre-occupations, prejudices, notions about who we are and dogmatic stances that we have learned to be all too familiar with. Internal life is mechanically determined by a process of identification with incoming impressions — we imagine that we are nothing other than what we see, hear and feel; we import an emotional tinge into the sense data that our surroundings determine for us; we identify powerfully with our states of being; because we identify so strongly with our opinions, we assume, for instance, that the picture we form of another person really is that person; we project our own states of being on to others. We assume that the way we read a poem is *the* way to read it; we project our certainty on to whatever we grasp by identifying with it.

But it need not be like this! We are *not* our sensations, *not* our feelings and we can choose to take ourselves out of identification which at least raises the possibility of having an experience that, in Zen, might be called *satori*. But there are other ways of *disidentification* and of getting into the conditions for successful haiku-writing.

A drunken poet,
black grapes dangling from his ears,
has started dancing

In P.D.Ouspensky's 'Work', for instance, the **First Conscious Shock** that can lead to psychological transformation is the realisation that we are *not* our impressions; that there is *no external world* other than that which our stereotypical responses to sense impressions construct for us. Ouspensky calls the process 'Self-Remembering' — the 'making still' of normal consciousness to create a GAP between reception of a sense impression and its intellectual/emotional/gut interpretation. The 'gap' constitutes a unitary moment of awareness in which we can construct the external world any way we choose, or not at all.

The winter street-lamp
a prostitute stands half-in
half-out of the light

Conventional poets, without the benefit of the concept of Ouspensky's **First Conscious Shock**, identify all too readily with the subject of their 'inspiration' (something artificial that comes into them), project their own feelings on to it, fly with it, reside in it, react with more or less mechanical poeticisms, choice of words, poetical techniques, etc.

On the other hand, haiku poets characteristically *self-remember*; they manage somehow to prevent sense impressions *at the point of entry* from acquiring the interpretations foisted on them by the more conventional parts of (false) personality. When they are on top form, haiku poets identify neither with the external world, nor with their feelings or thoughts, nor do they project feelings — they are not anthropo-centred.

There are secret paths
leading out of this land, through...

Through what? The poet keeps us guessing as he wonders, uncentred, what lies ahead...

... through
mountain flower fields

So where is their centre? Where is the haiku poet centred? As far as I know, Ouspensky didn't write haiku but his 'Work' might be as useful to thinking about haiku-ing as anything else.

What he says is that human beings are a combination of Essence and Personality — necessarily so. 'Essence' is the *tabula rasa* state one is born into; 'personality' derives from the learned states and conventional posturing that one is swept up into while earning a living or acquiring philosophical-religious-political beliefs; 'personality' is a falsity wrapped around the human essence that's common to all of us. When one gets to a certain level of consciousness one can begin to make one's way back into 'Essence' where the insights of the 'Perennial Philosophy' (the common ground of Tao, Buddhism, Zen, Sufism, non-institutionalised Christianity, Yoga, myths, fairy-tales, legends and so on) can always be received by all people as truisms.

Perhaps haiku poets are moving towards centring in 'Essence' as defined by Ouspensky: for haiku poets, sense impressions go straight to Essence, bypassing the false decorative bent of 'Personality'.

In the mountain night
echoing white thunder of...

what can it be that is 'thundering whitely'? In the pause at the end of the line, the moment of escape from sensation gives us the brute fact

... of
snow-melting rivers

It is, of course, difficult, if not impossible, to sustain access to Essence because it is so much more easy to submit to the dictates of Personality; we spend longer at it — money-making, scientific research, engaging in sport, politics, conquest, intrigue, crime, wealth, position, display, possession, food, clothing, housing, on and on. But little trips into Essence come out as little poems — haiku.

As a way of trying to initiate self-remembering, Ouspensky recommends 'Inner Stop' — if you observe that you are talking [or writing!] in a mechanical way or allowing Personality to make you annoyed with somebody you can 'make inner stop', cutting off all the manifestations of False Personality at least for a moment; there are many ways of doing this: a simple way is to contemplate the night sky full of stars. Whenever haiku poets feel themselves slipping into the slough of personality, observing that they are, for instance, striving for 'poetic effect' rather than registering a moment of self-remembering, they can 'make inner stop' — in a moment of tranquillity, they can stop mechanical reaction and by-pass Personality to allow Essence to receive impressions, if ever so briefly.

The object of **The Work** is to recover a lost state of constant self-remembering — to increase degrees of self-remembering by deliberate conscious effort.

Momentarily
on a layer of the wind —
faint breath of mugwort

Does engaging in the act of self-remembering result in the production of 'better' haiku? Well, judgements about the 'quality' of haiku are made at the point of reading: some haiku 'live' because they provide an 'aha' experience for you; others give you a 'ho-hum' feeling. Reactions vary between individuals as a result of a complex mix of experiential data.

A neutral meeting place for discussion can be found in the writing of Ouspensky whose system includes being susceptible to the principle of Opposites and their reconciliation (rather than their extinction). Grabbing hold of the pendulum that *always* swings from one point of view to another enables you to experience the positive-negative forces intrinsic to the way of the universe — the breathing in and out, the time to be born and the time to die. All esoteric writing emphasises the importance of being able to get to a point of no movement, to remain alive to Blake's 'Contraries' — without which, 'no progression'; drawing on more recent studies on the way the brain works, this might be to use all its potential — intellectual (neo-cortical), emotional (limbic) and kinaesthetic (reptilian), both right and left hand sides — to remain poised. In Bible Christianity, the state of balance is in the notion of Justice and the Righteousness that might get you into the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt V 20), if you are lucky. The Greek word for Righteousness (*δικη*) means staying upright between opposites. A haiku that 'works' is a 'just' haiku; in Elizabethan literary terminology, a *decorous* haiku, one which does not infringe literary sensibility. A haiku that toes some rule-bound line is often 'just a haiku' — a ho-hum haiku. Those that operate at the extreme left & right of the swing of the pendulum are not worth the name. But who's bold enough to say? How justice and decorum are achieved in haiku is anybody's guess.

Her position still
faintly visible — the moon
in snowy spring night

Keeping track of a sequence of haiku written over a month will probably reveal the way the pendulum swings for you — use of different parts of the brain, identifications, projections, loss of tension between negative and positive. The essential thing is to keep hold of the pendulum, sense its movement and use all your faculties to register the motion.

For me, the pendulum metaphor is very apt: I am happiest with haiku that come into being at the moment when the pendulum has swung from left and is just on the point of swinging to the right. At left or right extremities I relax mentally and indulge in 'false personality'; at the still centre of the swing, when it is possible to experience what Ouspensky calls 'Third Force', I imagine that I self-remember, visit Essence, become Nothing (or at least not-something), achieve focus, operate a 'both/and' rather than an 'either/or' mentality; in that split second, a haunting haiku can occur.

This valley's heaven
is long enough to contain
all the Milky Way

The haiku with which I have chosen to 'make Inner Stop'
during the course of this writing are all by Makoto Tamaki...

Reviews

Haiku Senryu & Poem for Small Places: Anita Packwood (44pp £3.00 incl p&p) available from: Anita Packwood, 14 Langcliffe Drive, Heelands, Milton Keynes MK13 7LA

'a bouquet is unnecessary / one single flower / says it all' concludes Anita Packwood. Ah, yes. These singles speak eloquently:

in the bedroom —
remains of
yesterday's apple

outside the door
a gift from my cat —
dragonfly wings

And this amused me: 'Summer's night — / the Earth doesn't move / but the bed breaks'. But the happy few are well concealed; much of the bunch is, frankly, unnecessary: eg 'birds are singing / a different song — / leave are thinning' [sic], or, 'Summer wearing green / fascinating colourful / heavens residue'. Some of the proceeds go to MS research — a good excuse for buying the book, but perhaps also an excuse for not taking it seriously enough, which would be a shame. 'handle my poetry / with care...' Anita requests, but a more careful arrangement on her part might have seen her brighter haiku more prominently displayed.

ML

Giovanni Jacopo Meditates (on the High IQ Haiku) translated by Douglas Livingstone, illustrated by Gus Ferguson, The Firfield Pamphlet Press, PO Box 375, Cape Town, 8000 South Africa. £3

Curiouser and curiouser. Beautifully produced; splendid paper; entertaining, simple illustrations; pity about the so-called 17 haiku — they are all printed in upper case — but none of them would make it to Blithe Spirit. I seem to have missed the joke.

A Small Umbrella Spring Street Haiku Group, Dee Evetts, 102 Forsyth St. #18, New York, NY 10002. £2.50.

This is the Spring Street Haiku Group's third annual chapbook; 1995s selection of 43 haiku represents the work of 11 haiku writers. There is work from some new names this year. I particularly liked Kam Holifield's haiku. This is the one that provides the title for this 4" × 5½" size book:

A small umbrella
the toes of my sneakers
discoloured by rain

The old hands, Cor van den Heuvel, Doris Heitmeyer, Dee Evetts and Karen Sohne have not lost their fine touch. Writing of failing to catch a haiku moment, Karen Sohne catches one:

the haiku
completely gone
by the time I've dried my hands

I am always struck by how 'foreign' haiku from across the Atlantic can seem:

the Halloween parade
on the sidelines
a pair of Hassidim

In Mykel Board's haiku, our common language reveals just how uncommon is our culture. There is plenty to learn from this little book.

JAH

words (30 poems) and words 2 (31 poems) by ai li, available from the author. £10.99 each (+ p&p)

Despite the poor quality of a large number of these poems, the ones which succeed are very good and work well as haiku, or poems that are evocative in a similar way. In their favour, the two books contain nothing which strikes a 'haikuesque' pose. However, too much is burdensome to read as it attempts to manipulate the imagination rather than allow the reader an individual response. In

old colonial houses
rude banging shutters

I might have enjoyed discovering for myself the possibility of 'rudeness'.

lichen on the roof
nature's
liver spots

is gratuitously facile into the bargain. On the other hand, there is also a feeling throughout these books of something left unpointed to. The extreme brevity can give a startling image but it is often either forced or underdeveloped.

The poems which fail do so either because too much is contrived in too short a space, producing the manipulative *rude shutters* and *lichen*, or because too little is provided to engage the reader's imagination. I find the latter less objectionable; it might be the symptom of the main risk any minimalist poet takes — that of being too economical and at least it doesn't irritate like a piece of food stuck between the teeth eg

red leaves
fall
again

— such poems are simply forgettable. However, I suspect those which fail through contrivance are a result of self-conscious use of imagery and symbolism; this is an obstacle in any poetry and the shorter the form the more painfully obvious it is.

I always enjoy discovering poems I'd initially overlooked in haiku collections and in spite of the fact that not many of these are 'quiet' enough

for that, I have found one or two, eg

rusty daimler
alighting dowager
farts

Here the humour strained after in the *lichen* poem comes effortlessly. Ai li's most effective work is that in which the visual images are least stridently defined. She seems to improve the vaguer her images become:

drizzle on sand
moving sculpture

For me, she is at her best when the concrete image comes close to disappearing. The following poem has real depth and mystery:

returning
at dusk
realising
that
i
walked
with
a
stranger

FS

Scots Haiku: Bruce Leeming (ISBN 1 870653) obtainable from the author
(see members' list)

My maternal grandmother was a Scotswoman of the old school — very outspoken, witty, and with a pungent yet poetic Scots vocabulary. Her father was a publican in Berwick-on-Tweed and, perhaps because she had been brought up in the lively environment of a traditional Scottish inn, she had a vivid way with language. She never failed to fascinate me with her tales of the Borders.

When I first read some of Bruce Leeming's Scots haiku in **Blithe Spirit**, I wondered if haiku could really be conveyed in that outlandish tongue. Yet as I read this book, my grandmother's voice kept coming back to me. Leeming explains in an Introduction that Scots is mainly a literary language based on many different tongues, including Pictish and Norse. My ancestors on my father's side were Frisian Norsemen, Vikings who raided the east coasts of Ireland and England. So, as I read these haiku, I feel I am hearing the tongue of my pagan fathers, and, in a strange way, I understand them without having to check with the translations.

The translations read well in English. But after the first shock of surprise, the Scots originals cast a real spell. They have to be read aloud in order to savour their full beauty, the strangeness of their eloquence. When, from time to time, a Sassenach word appears, I feel almost indignant at the intrusion — though I am by no means a linguistic purist. 'Sabbath morn', one haiku begins, and it nearly puts me off reading the rest. But what else could the poet say? The translation is simply 'Sunday morning'. Modern words like 'jets' (ie jet planes) also seem out of place, and 'Twa meenits seelence' sounds too close to the English 'Two minutes silence'.

But these minor objections have always been raised in connection with Lallans. In fact, as one reads on, they no longer matter, for the spell of these wonderful words — grotesque, ghostly, grim but vigorous, with the speech of a well-hung tongue like my grandmother's, begins to bind the brain and transform us into beings from a mystic tribal past entertaining a group of friends by firelight with songs and sayings and ballads of witches and fetches. Listen to this — or, rather, practise saying it aloud:

Ladin the deid-kist
intil the pail — ane chiel
lunts a gun

Loading the coffin
into the hearse — one man
smokes a pipe

So it doesn't mean at all what one first thinks it means! It forms a true haiku moment, because it has those universal images which both override and support the sound of the words.

Nature, too, holds universal sway in all languages:

A whaup's wheepee
lane amang the hills —
bairnheid mindins

A curlew's cry
lonely in the hills —
memories of childhood

What a magnificent word 'wheepie' is to translate the curlew's cry! And 'lane' is the sort of word everyone should know, and use, for it expresses an anguish even deeper than 'lonely'.

Finally, my grandmother's voice comes back to me:

Een athort the bey
yatt lichts gliff yallochie
— tassies plinkin

Evening across the bay
yacht lights gleam yellowish
— glasses tinkling

Bruce Leeming has produced an original and memorable collection, full of guts and great haiku spirit.

JK

Guest Spot

By a bonfire, we
two having passionate sex
in archaic dark --
together re-enacting
the love tribe's ancestral rite.

Kimoto futari
taiko no yamino
kagaribi no
sobade maguwai
ai zoku no oya

Year-end party -- but
when it's over, vanity
spews out it's vomit

Fuyu no en
hatete kyoei o
hedo to haku

Michio Nakano

Translated by James Kirkup and Makoto Tamaki

From Michio Nakano's new book, SHIKAKU (Angels of Vision),
published in December 1995.



Price £1.50

ISSN 1353-3320