HAIKU GOES WEST

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The frog leaps out of its pond

It has been more than eight centuries since the first haiku-like verses were composed in Japanese, yet only a little over eight decades since a group of Frenchmen visiting Japan wrote the first known haiku in a Western language. According to a venerable (and probably spurious) tradition, the first authentic haiku in Japanese was written by the Emperor Horikawa sometime before his death in 1107. Over the next several centuries haiku slowly evolved into a poetic form which came to be regarded by many Japanese as distinctly expressing their own "unique" culture and spirit. Since the publication of the Frenchmen's efforts in 1905, however, this claim has been increasingly open to debate. In the past eighty years haiku has mushroomed into a worldwide poetic movement now practiced in every inhabited continent and in languages as varied as English, Arabic, Dutch, and Serbo-Croatian.

Why the appeal? How could the shortest recognized form of poetry in the world achieve such preeminence? Haiku is frequently—and perhaps most accurately—described in terms of contradictory superlatives. It manages to find the eternal in the briefest moments of experience, significance in the most ordinary subject matter. In its simple language, it often says more than the most learned treatises. It is intentionally nonintellectual, unintentionally profound. Concrete images often dissolve into unspeakable insight; fathomless depths lie beneath the shimmering surface. And most of all: despite the lavish applause and boasts on its behalf, haiku itself remains unassuming, almost bashful.

When Bashō in the seventeenth century wrote his famous haiku about the sound of a frog jumping into an old pond, could he have realized what a big splash that little frog would eventually make? Now that haiku has not only grown up, but also left home, how vital will it continue to be? Can an unpretentious poetic form with its roots in the nature-worship of ancient Japan survive the modern world of concrete and glitter? And, moreover, what possibilities are there for this "quintessentially" Japanese art form as it makes its way through the world, dealing with new languages, new environments, and new cultures?

Despite its recent geographic and historical flowering, the roots of haiku are indeed deeply embedded in Japanese culture and history. The oldest secular anthology of Japanese poetry, the *Manyoshu*, compiled in the 8th century, already contained poetry consisting of alternating lines of five and seven *onji*, or sound-syllables. By the time of the *Kokinshu* some two hundred

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.[1]

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.[2]

years later, tanka had established itself as the most popular poetic form. Written in lines of 5-7-5; 7-7, with a rhythmical pause typically found after the first three lines, tanka anticipated the three-line, 5-7-5 form haiku would adopt later on.

In both of these ancient anthologies one finds a developing poetic sensibility which, in characteristic Japanese fashion, emphasizes a this-worldly, sensuous enjoyment of nature. While these inclinations were somewhat in conflict with the metaphysical and otherworldly doctrines of Buddhism spreading throughout Japan at the time, one thing which the ancient Japanese poets already understood well was the Buddha's stress on self-renunciation over passion and intellectuality. Individuals occupy a relatively small — but never insignificant — place in the grander scheme of nature. Japan would in time remake Buddhism into Zen, and the native poetic tendency to lose the "self" in an aesthetic appreciation of nature would be carried over into haiku intact.

Poetry in Japan could not and did not develop solely as a medium for individual expression. From the earliest times poems and versified replies were exchanged among the nobility. With the coming of *renga*, or linked verse, poetry became an organized group activity with definite rules and procedures, practiced at first by aristocrats in their courts, and later by the common populace in their taverns and tea houses as well. Like tanka, renga were composed in groups of 5-7-5 and 7-7, but with alternating stanzas — sometimes as many as a thousand — written by several poets in turns. Far from stifling creativity, the group effort allowed for an active interplay between the poets' individual styles and talents. The opening stanza of a renga was called the *hokku*, literally the "starting verse."

Only gradually did the hokku come to be regarded as a separate poetic unit. Shiki, in the late 19th century, was actually the first to use the word "haiku" to designate the hokku as a self-contained poem, thus crystallizing in theory a practice which had been slowly but persistently developing since Basho's time and before. Even Bashō, despite his almost legendary standing in the history of haiku, was technically not a haiku poet at all, but a teacher of renga. Buson's legacy too was his poetry, not the paintings he achieved fame for in his own lifetime. Slowly, however, haiku established itself as an independent art form, and by Shiki's time the rules for writing haiku had become relatively fixed; haiku, in what had now become the "classical" tradition, was to be written in the 5-7-5 form, deal with a theme from nature, incorporate a *kigo* or season word, and most importantly, express a brief moment of experience and insight through the use of concrete imagery.

Nothing could prevent the systematizing nineteenth century from becoming the iconoclastic twentieth century, however, and it was not long before one of Shiki's disciples, Kawahigashi Hekigodo, instituted the New Trend Haiku Movement, which undertook as one of its primary aims the task of seeing just how many of the "classical" rules could be broken. New Trend poets and their literary successors experimented with unmetered line breaks, images which made no reference to either nature or the seasons, and — to the horror of staid traditionalists — language which dealt intimately with the subjective feelings of the poet. Other avant garde movements were spawned, and a number of independent, idiosyncratic poets emerged. Two prominent examples were Taneda Santoka and Ozaki Hosai, whose freewheeling, and often freeloading, lifestyles were as unconventional as their haiku.

Among the outraged poets who opposed the innovations was another of Shiki's disciples, Takahama Kyoshi, who insisted that "true" haiku be written in the traditional form with all the customary rules scrupulously followed. Takahama edited what went on to become perhaps the most prestigious, the most influential, and (predictably) the most conservative literary magazine publishing haiku, *Hototogisu*. Despite the magazine's early openness to modern fiction, it adopted a reactionary attitude towards haiku, valiantly defending the traditional form from what it feared would be certain death by innovation — or worse, assimilation with other "modern" poetic forms. Ultimately among contemporary poets in Japan it seems as if the conservative confinements of Kyoshi have won out over the innovating initiatives of Hekigodo: the vast majority of those writing haiku in Japan today write in the traditional form, following the rules with perhaps even more exactitude than the so-called "classical" poets did.

Meanwhile, haiku in the West had been rapidly developing in quite different directions. In the first part of the twentieth century, several English translations of Japanese haiku appeared, including a collection entitled *Japanese Lyrics*, based on renderings by Lafcadio Hearn. The early translations ran from the luminous to the ludicrous. Compare, for example, Hearn's effortless rendering of Basho's *furu ike ya:*

> Old pond — frogs jumped in — sound of water.

with Clara A. Walsh's monstrosity:

> An old-time pond, from off whose shadowed depth
> Is heard the splash where some lithe frog leaps in.

It would be several decades before decent translations in English were the norm rather than the exception.

In 1923 Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," which Pound himself described as a "hokku-like sentence," appeared in the new, Chicago-based *Poetry* magazine. Despite Pound's partial disclaimer, the poem is quite possibly the first haiku ever to be published in English. Amy Lowell, successor to Pound's "imagism," wrote poetry consciously based on haiku models, although few of her poems were intentionally written as haiku. The work of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams also included lines which were often haiku-like in conception. Williams' dictum "no ideas but in things" was the kind of statement many haiku poets might agree with, even though most would piously avoid ever uttering such an un-haiku-like abstraction themselves.

It was not until after the second world war that haiku firmly crossed the Pacific and established itself on American shores. The post-war period in the West was marked by an increased interest in all things Japanese, but particular attention was devoted to Zen and its literary companion, haiku. R. H. Blyth, an Englishman who had been interned in Japan for part of the war, published his massive four-volume set of translations, *Haiku*, between 1949 and 1952. The translations were vivid, although highly subjective and at times misleading. They were also extremely popular. Blyth's engaging commentary in this collection and in his two-volume *A History of Haiku*, firmly linked haiku to Zen and had a direct influence on the nascent Beat movement of the 1950's.

Jack Kerouac, the American writer who is credited with having coined the word "beat," made an oblique but almost certain reference to Blyth's influence in his novel, *The Dharma Bums*, which mentions the discovery of a "fine quadruple-volume edition of Japanese haikus [sic]." Kerouac's book, which had an enormous influence on a whole generation of writers and poets, shows its protagonist, Japhy Ryder, studying Zen and

Jackrabbit eyes all night
breakfast in Elko.[3]

In my medicine cabinet,
the winter fly
has died of old age.[4]

dirt farmer's wife
at the screen door:
no tractor sound [5]

writing haiku, and contains a few examples. Gary Snyder, the real-life American poet on whom the character Japhy Ryder is based, did in fact compose haiku and haiku-like sequences, some of which were published in *Earth House Hold*, a book written in a style similar to Bashō's *Journey Through the Northern Provinces* and other haiku travel diaries. Allen Ginsberg, the archetypal beat poet and a friend of both Snyder's and Kerouac's, also tried his hand at writing haiku.

As with beat Zen, there is a tendency to dismiss beat haiku for its superficialities when compared to the allegedly superior sensitivities of the Japanese masters. Snyder and Ginsberg both became active practitioners of Buddhism and went on to write enormously successful poetry. But the critics are probably right when they suggest that the early beat haiku isn't nearly as significant in itself as the interest it sparked among writers who would subsequently go on to perfect the form in English and give it a distinctively American voice.

The medium through which this voice began to gain recognition in the United States were small press haiku magazines. The first haiku magazine in English (and quite possibly in any Western language), *American Haiku*, began publication in 1963, setting the trend for a number of American magazines devoted exclusively to original haiku in English. Haiku poets began refining their skills and insights, some continuing to follow the 5-7-5 model and others experimenting with forms which took advantage of the natural rhythms of English.

Haiku also began to be taught in American public schools, with Harold Henderson's *An Introduction to Haiku* and *Haiku in English* frequently used as textbooks. In 1968 Henderson and others formed The Haiku Society of America, based in New York City, which now has several hundred members worldwide and publishes the quarterly haiku magazine, *Frogpond*. Interest in the United States has surged to the point that there are currently an estimated 25 haiku magazines and presses publishing haiku in English, well over 300 haiku books in print, and literally thousands of actively writing haiku poets.

Nor was the interest in haiku confined to the United States. Poets from other English-speaking countries, particularly Canada, were also writing and publishing their work. Haiku, moreover, was becoming a world movement, a poetic language of many tongues. In 1977 the Yugoslavian magazine *Haiku: Casopis za haiku poeziju* (Haiku: Magazine of Haiku Poetry) began publication. Four years later two Dutch-speaking haiku groups from the Netherlands and Belgium founded the haiku journal *Vuursteen* ("Flint"). An active haiku movement got underway in Germany, and poets in languages as varied as Spanish, Greek, and Arabic began to find an international audience for their work as well. In the eighty short years since haiku had left the home pond to cross the wide oceans of the world, it had made quite a name for itself.

The frog gets a set of new clothes

As haiku expanded geographically, it also expanded in other ways, taking haiku in directions hardly contemplated in the land of its origin. Whereas Japanese haiku had been nurtured on the mountains, rivers, and cherry blossoms of Japan, there were new landscapes to be explored by haiku abroad. Randy Brooks' chapbook, *barbwire holds its ground*, contains haiku of America's heartland plains, and provides, according to one commentator, nothing less than "an inventory of Kansas." Moroccan poet Abdelhadi Barchale wrote a haiku in Arabic about a snail inching along on the stones of Casablanca, which many readers worldwide no doubt found delightfully exotic.

The new landscapes and climates posed a serious problem for haiku poets — what to do with the traditional Japanese kigo, or season word. The issue was not (as seems to be a commonly held misconception among the Japanese) that Japan is the only country in the world with four seasons. There were, of course, haiku being written in countries outside of the temperate zone, but the chief problem was literary rather than climatic: even in countries with seasonal variations similar to Japan's there was nothing comparable in their literary traditions to the authoritative lists of season words available to haiku poets writing in Japanese.

The extensive, and sometimes ponderous, season word lists of Japanese haiku contain literally thousands of entries which allow readers to immediately identify certain words with particular seasons. With some season words, such as *yuki* (snow), the season is immediately recognizable, while with others the references can be quite arbitrary. When the word *tsuki* (moon), for example, appears without other qualifiers in a Japanese haiku, it is by convention accepted as a season word for autumn, despite the obvious fact that the moon can be observed year-round. An *oborozuki* (hazy moon), on the other hand, would be understood — also by convention — as referring to

Sunlight is steady —
napalm ignites the forest —
fire burns over wood [6]

tundra [7]

In your panties
slightly pulled down
a crisp fallen leaf [8]

spring. Too bad for the poet who wanted to write about a hazy moon on a summer or winter night! There might be other ways, of course, to get the image across without making reference to spring, but certainly not by using the word *oborozuki*.

It is also impermissible in traditional Japanese haiku to mix the seasons. The English haiku

in the driving snow
a blinding white flurry
of plum blossoms

captures the uneven, sometimes violent transitions of the seasons, comparing the white of the gentle blossoms with the white of the ravaging snow. Such a scene would not be uncommon even in Japan, yet the haiku is unacceptable by traditional standards because it mixes the winter season word "snow" with the spring season word "plum blossoms."

The history of haiku in English is simply too short for it to have developed such traditions, and there are many writers of English haiku who feel that most of the standard conventions are artificial anyway, tending to stifle the natural spontaneity of haiku. Whereas some haiku poets in the West advocate dropping the season word altogether (as do a remnant of avante garde haiku poets in Japan), there are others who have found subtle, but original ways of evoking the seasons. The word "mistletoe," for example, has seasonal connotations which would be readily understood in the West, but not in Japan.

Haiku in the West had to deal with new emotional and cultural landscapes as well. To some Western poets the garden variety of "nature" haiku being written in Japan seemed increasingly sentimental and naive, appropriate perhaps to a pristine past but certainly not to the pollution-weary present. American poet Marlene Mountain [see interview] parodied Bashō's "old pond" poem with this one-line haiku: "old pond a frog rises belly up." Three hundred years have passed since Bashō's haiku in 1686 — with everything from the Industrial Revolution to Chernobyl in between — but Mountain speculates, "if Bashō were living in my time, there's a good chance that he would write a haiku similar to mine." Nature words have themselves become polluted, Mountain notes. "Rain" in the twentieth century includes the connotation of acid rain, "sea" includes oil spills, "insects" insecticides, "air" ozone depletion, "animals" extinction, "life" nuclear war. Nature is no longer the same as it was in Bashō's time. Haiku shouldn't be either.

While the majority of haiku poets in the West continued to write haiku about "everyday life," the work of others, such as Mountain, was beginning to acquire political dimensions. Ecopolitics, feminism, the peace movement — all were new, almost improbable, movements for haiku to be getting involved with. Edward Tick's *On Sacred Mountain: Vietnam Remembered* certainly did not contain the first haiku ever to be written about war. But knowing that the sequence was compiled by a doctor out of "images of actual events reported by Vietnam combat veterans suffering post-traumatic stress disorder" unmistakably added to the book's political relevance. In the precise concrete images of haiku, the collection managed to capture all the hazy ambiguities of the war itself. The project was also an interesting example of haiku being written empathetically out of the experiences of others, rather than out of one's own experience.

Perhaps it was inevitable that in leaving its sheltered home for the wide world at large, haiku would begin to lose some of its innocence. If haiku could be written about war, it could also be written about sex. What had been implicitly suggested in some of the bawdy verses of the lower classes in Japan during the Edo period, became explicit in twentieth-century Western haiku. But beyond the explicitness, the so-called "erotic haiku" initiated by the West could, at its best, also focus on the deeper, more meaningful aspects of male-female relationships. Human affairs in traditional Japanese verse had always been confined to *senryu* — haiku's lighter, more humorous poetic cousin. In haiku itself the emotional side of male-female relationships was probably even more of a taboo than pure physical eroticism. Traditional haiku was by gentlemen's agreement to be strictly about relationships between humans and nature. The birds and the bees had to be real birds and real bees.

The West changed all of that and more. In light of the various expansions haiku was going through, a relatively minor problem was that of adopting haiku to languages which did not necessarily lend themselves well to the 5-7-5 form. Some early Western poets (and translators) almost slavishly insisted on rendering English-language haiku in 5-7-5 syllables — occasionally rhyming the first and third lines — even when it detracted from the effectiveness of the poem. But since Western poetry in general had already all but abandoned the use of rhyme and meter in favor of free verse, contemporary poets writing haiku in the West were not about to exchange one set of poetic constraints for another. Since seventeen English syllables and seventeen Japanese onji are not really equal anyway, either in terms of the amount of time it takes to say them or the amount of meaning they contain, many writers of haiku in English found it preferable to write in fewer syllables. William Higginson in *The Haiku Handbook* concludes that twelve English syllables are roughly equivalent in both meaning and duration to seventeen onji in Japanese. Different ratios would obtain for other languages: haiku in Chinese could be half as long as Japanese haiku without sacrificing anything as far as sound or nuance are concerned.

Since haiku in Japanese is typically presented on the page in one vertical line or column (while maintaining a 5-7-5 rhythm), there should have been nothing sacrosanct about the custom of writing English haiku in three lines. The practice, however, was extremely widespread. It is only recently that Western poets have begun to experiment with writing haiku in a varying number of lines. One-line and two-line haiku have been the most popular, although haiku in more than three lines are not unheard of. Occasionally the arrangement of the words on the page is reminiscent of traditional Japanese *haiga*, paintings which incorporate a haiku written in asymmetrical brushstrokes of calligraphy. There have also been experiments with "visual" haiku — using patterns of words and letters to form pictures.

The West's fascination with haiku has led to an increased interest in a number of related traditional forms. Serious tanka have been written by Michael McClintock, Sanford Goldstein, and Jorge Luis Borges (in Spanish). Jack Kerouac's novel *Desolation Angels* contains an early example in English of the haiku-like prose known as *haibun* in Japan. Senryu in the West has found ways of dealing with the irony and bite of Western humor, and haiku sequences, of which there are precedents in Japan, have come to be written in English and other languages. Groups of Western poets have combined their talents to compose renga, sometimes through the mail, producing such works as *The Ragged Mists Renga* by John Wills (in Tennessee), Cor Van Den Heuvel (in New Jersey) and Michael McClintock (in California). The movement has produced other interesting combinations as well. Hiroaki Sato's *In Your Panties* is an erotic solo renga written in English by a Japanese educated in Kyoto now living in New York.

The frog suffers an identity crisis

There are purists who would claim that haiku is a form of poetic expression unique to Japan and that the only real haiku are haiku written in Japanese. Naturally this point of view seems to find more adherents in Japan than in the West. More than once the Western student of haiku will hear the claim made that Westerners can never *really* understand Japanese haiku (let alone write it, implied).

Part of the widespread tendency among Japanese to regard their culture as "unique" is due, no doubt, to the understandable longing to preserve old traditions in the face of pressure to "internationalize." Part of it too is pure ethnocentrism: the culture of Japan is sometimes presented as being subtle and inscrutable while the culture of the West is regarded as relatively superficial and easy to understand. Japan can "assimilate" the West, but not vice versa. It is interesting to note that ever since Perry's arrival, Japan hasn't looked at itself so much as having "modernized" as having become "Westernized" — a dubious use of labels, considering the almost total lack of Western values and ways of thinking in Japan.

The line goes, however, that while Japan can *really* understand the West and has proved it by building skyscrapers, wearing jeans, and eating hamburgers, the West can never *really* understand Japan: "Japanese spirit" is more sublime than "Western materialism" and thus Japanese culture — of which haiku is a part — is inimitable. By contrast, Western technology is presumably easy to copy. Certainly, though, the West has neither an exclusive monopoly on all the world's material wealth nor on all its spiritual impoverishment, as is occasionally intimated. But the seeming prevalence of this point of view in Japan might legitimately lead one to ask if most Japanese have ever *really* been able to understand the spiritual, moral, and aesthetic subtleties of Western culture.

The real problem here, of course, is that the debate itself is superficial. Questions about the extent to which genuine cross-cultural "understanding" is possible have arisen from time to time in other contexts: Can whites sing the blues? Can Europeans play jazz? — Or as some Westerners have naively, but no doubt sincerely asked about the Japanese: can Seiji Ozawa understand the subtleties of Western music enough to direct the Boston Symphony Orchestra? Will young people in Japan ever be able to dance like Michael Jackson? A case could be made, moreover, that history is as much of a barrier to cultural understanding as geography is. TV translations of Shakespeare's plays perhaps make the bard's "archaic" language more accessible to Japanese than it is even to most "native speakers" of English, just as English translations of the *Manyoshu* are probably more readily understood by English-speakers than the original Japanese is by Japanese.

Of course, the type of "understanding" which haiku requires is not conceptual, but intuitive, going beyond spoken language to unspeakable insight. And a lack of this intuitive "feel" is what is usually meant when charges of "misunderstanding" are leveled. Even here, though, what passes for "intuition" is often little more than the tire tracks of old stodgy habits so deeply inrutted in the grooves of the brain that no one needs to verbalize them any longer. Real intuition doesn't mean being able to understand people who share the same long history and customs as oneself, but rather being able to understand a person's deepest inner feelings regardless of culture or background. Going through the unspoken ritual of filling up another person's beer glass at the proper time isn't intuition. Knowing that the person really doesn't want any more beer is. Intuition in haiku too is more than being able to deftly follow the proper conventions.

The most superficial charge against haiku in English is that it doesn't follow the Japanese "rules." Rules have been important to nearly every major poetic form developed in Japan, from ancient tanka to medieval renga to contempory haiku. The emphasis on rules has indeed often produced a kind of pure, formal beauty. Yet throughout the history of Japanese literature, poetry has periodically languished because poets have become more concerned with showing off their wit and cleverness at following the rules than with expressing poetic insight. Bashō and Buson are "great" precisely because of their reinvigorating efforts to rescue poetry from the triviality to which it had degenerated during their lifetimes. They were both able to breathe poetic life back into the corpse of mere convention.

An art form can be successful in another culture only to the extent that the culture makes it idiomatically its own. Art that merely imitates may capture the form, but never the essence of the original, which is part of the reason why most arm-waving rock singers in Japan don't excite much interest in the West and also why many first attempts at writing haiku in English can be justly dismissed as lackluster failures. Early haiku in English too often concentrated on parroting the precise form of haiku without really plumbing its artistic depths. Now, however, the situation is reversed: Western haiku poets have become much less concerned with the form of haiku than with its expressive potential. It was only natural that as haiku adapted itself to other languages, cultures, and insights, it would in the process become something quite different from what its originators intended — once out on their own, children almost never fulfill all their parents' expectations.

The one, and perhaps only, "rule" which seems to be consistently followed in both Japanese and English haiku is the rule concerning the "haiku moment": haiku should confine itself to a single moment of intuitive experience, expressed primarily through images, with an economy of words. Writing in spare language makes it possible for the essence of the moment to be captured and shared with others. The reader is invited to empathize with the experiences and insights of the poet. This stress on intuitive communication certainly does make haiku a difficult and demanding art form, even between members of the same culture. The difficulties are only exacerbated when the understanding is also crosscultural. If Westerners seem to have such a difficult time understanding Japanese haiku, how completely might it be possible in turn for a person who has spent all of his or her life in Japan to understand the haiku of the West?

Consider, for example, this haiku from Gary Hines' chapbook, *Roadsigns:*

> Racing shadows
> of clouds
> on the interstate.

On the simplest level — the visual level — the reader sees that the poet is in a speeding car on a freeway while the clouds overhead are creating swiftly moving patterns on the pavement. It's a windy day. The wind moving the clouds is similar to the air which is perhaps rushing in through the open windows or vents of the car. The poet uses the metaphor of a race to relate the swiftness of the clouds to the speed of the moving automobile.

All of these images might be picked up by the careful reader of this haiku. But what cultural overtones does the poem also have? Certainly the poem would have a deeper meaning for someone who knows what it is like to open up, pedal to the metal, on an American freeway somewhere out in the middle of nowhere. That is, someone who has actually had the experience will be better able to relate to the experience the haiku is describing. On a social level, a reader should also know something of America's "love affair" with the automobile and the excitement it has added to American life (everything from rumble seats to hot-rodding). The driver of the car in Hines' haiku is obviously young (or young-at-heart), quite possibly an adolescent, rebellious, eager to test limits, open to new experiences — feelings which usually come at a later age in Japan and often in a less traumatic way. The implied reference to speeding also gives the haiku a sense of lawlessness. Only intuition will tell us that a trooper with his radar is waiting just around the next curve.

Additionally suggested or hinted at are typical anti-authoritarian American attitudes: the love of freedom, reckless individualism, travel, adventure. These in turn rest on historical precedents: Columbus, the explorers, the Mayflower, colonists and pioneers, heading West, immigrants, Model T's — the characters and modes of transportation change, but the general "itchiness to move on" remains. Further associations are embodied in American literature: Whitman's "Song of the Open Road," Kerouac's *On the Road,* Woody Guthrie's "ribbon of highway." And beyond these lie the eternal philosophical and moral questions the West is always so fond of asking: Where is the person in the poem going? Why is he going there? What is his *purpose*?

When Hines wrote this haiku he probably didn't consciously set out to put all of these meanings into it, although "intuitive" readers could certainly get this much out of it and more — the sound of a frog jumping into an old pond lasts only for a moment, but the ripples go on and on. On one level Hines' haiku is relatively easy to understand and could easily be dismissed as "superficial" by someone who only superficially understood it. On another level, however, the difficulties of really understanding it go far beyond the problem of finding an open stretch of highway in Japan to test the haiku out on.

Instead of pointing up the cultural barriers which haiku occasionally present, a far more productive approach is to look at haiku as a form of sharing. The point in writing haiku, after all, isn't to imitate another culture or to smugly wrap oneself in a transparent veneer of cultural "uniqueness," but to leave a record of one's own personal experiences and insights. Haiku is

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Boy in a red cap
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on the very first snow [9]

Pique-nique. La fourmi
sur la nappe quadrillée disparaît
dans un carreau noir.

Picnic. The ant
on the chequered tablecloth disappears
into a black square. [10]

* * * *

Pod kopitima
spomenika kralju
dvadesetak golubova

Under the hooves
of the king's memorial
twenty pigeons. [11]

* * * *

حلزون على حجر
يمشي في حذر
خريف يحتضر

a snail on the stones
advances with care.
autumn draws to an end. [12]

communication. The haiku poet writes nothing of his inner feelings, only of the perceptual experience which provoked those inner feelings. Yet if the reader has had similar experiences, the haiku will be able to provoke similar feelings in him or her as well. By sketching out only the essential details of a scene, the poet deliberately leaves blank spaces to be filled in with the reader's own emotions and experiences. Haiku doesn't "exist" in the words themselves, but in the shared experiences of the poet and the reader. The poem itself is simply a link between two persons.

In this sense, then, haiku has become truly international, going beyond particular geographies and cultures. By narrowing in on a moment of individual human experience, haiku opens up the way to universal human experience. A haiku which can only be understood by people from the same culture is simply an unsuccessful haiku. It fails precisely because of its inability to communicate on a personal, human level — to touch our common humanity. Really good haiku build bridges across the oceans, channels between the ponds. *Something of* the poet will be communicated to the reader, even though the reader may not be able to grasp *everything* the poet intended (let alone all the meanings which go beyond what the poet intended). The ultimate reward is in how much one's life has been enriched for having made the effort. ■

1. Ezra Pound, *Collected Shorter Poems* (Faber Faber 1952)
2. From "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Wallace Stevens, in *The Norton Anthology*, p. 249.
3. From Hitch Haiku by Gary Snyder, *The Back Country* (New Directions 1968).
4. Jack Kerouac, in *The Haiku Anthology*, ed. Cor Van Den Heuval (Simon and Schuster, Inc. 1986), p. 112.
5. Randy Brooks, *Barbwire Holds Its Ground* (High/Coo Press, 1981), no page. [Haiku about Kansas].
6. Edward Tick, *On Sacred Mountain: Vietnam Remembered* (High/Coo Press, 1984).
7. One-word haiku by Cor Van Den Heuvel. In Van Den Heuvel, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
8. Opening hokku from the solo renga, "In Your Panties," by Hiroaki Sato, in Sato, *op. cit.*, p. 199.
9. Raymond Roseliep, in *One Hundred Frogs: From Renga to Haiku* to English by Hiroaki Sato (Weatherhill, 1983) p. 213.
10. French haiku by Jocelyne Villeneuve [Canadian], *The Haiku Handbook* by William J. Higginson (McGraw-Hill, 1985) p. 82.
11. Yugoslavian haiku by Vladimir Devide. In Higginson, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
12. Arabic haiku by Abdelhadi Barchale [Morocco]. In Higginson, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

FOR FURTHER READING: William Higginson's *The Haiku Handbook* was an indispensible source of information for this article. *The Haiku Anthology*, edited by Cor Van den Heuvel, contains some of the best haiku in English published to date. The title of Rod Willmot's compilation, *Erotic Haiku,* speaks for itself. Hiroaki Sato's *One Hundred Frogs: From Renga to Haiku to English* surveys the various historical and cultural transformations haiku literature has undergone. For uninitiated readers of Japanese wishing to understand the subtleties of real haiku in English, there's Sato's new book *Haiku in English: A Poetic Form Expands,* written in Japanese, complete with Japanese translations of English haiku.

THE NEW HAIKU

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARLENE MOUNTAIN

by Richard Evanoff

MARLENE MOUNTAIN, American haiku poet living in the mountains of eastern Tennessee, has been one of the most innovative and influential writers of haiku in English, having contributed to the expansion of both its form and content. Her work has appeared in numerous books and anthologies of haiku in English, as well as in Newsweek and various literary magazines. Her most recent book, *pissed off poems and crosswords*, takes haiku far beyond her achievements in the book which first brought her critical acclaim, *the old tin roof*, published in 1976.

You lived in Matsuyama in 1970 and had some contact with Japanese haiku at that time. Are there any rules for writing haiku in Japanese which you feel should be maintained in writing haiku in English?

I don't know the origin of the phrase "moments keenly perceived," but I find it meaningful and something to hang onto as my haiku "change". However, I wonder if either Japanese or Western haiku poets truly write (or have ever written) to the fullest of that idea. The haiku I see being written are about *some* "moments keenly perceived," i.e., the pleasant ones. Also *some* of "the here and now," *some* "things as they are," and so on. As far as Japanese haiku are concerned, readers in the West are limited, of course, by what the translators have chosen to translate for us — but most of what I've seen has been about the "nice side of life". I have a lot of trouble with just that view. Since there's not been a particularly interesting definition of haiku that I've seen or heard, or at least one which seems to encompass all that we experience in our heads and hearts and through our senses, I just write what moves me — and call it haiku.

You've been credited as being one of the first writers in English — or in any language (Japanese included) for that matter — to treat such themes as feminism, politics, and eroticism in haiku. How good a vehicle do you feel haiku is for exploring these areas?

In August 1977 I experienced a spiritual/mental/emotional explosion — more a rebirthing — in which whatever concerns I had about "form" simply disappeared, and at the same time I began questioning my attitudes and limitations regarding "content". It was really a rebirthing of "life" — one that led to a reevaluation of the myths and lies I'd been led to believe about practically everything, and especially about what had been left out of the record, or distorted, about women. I was permanently and deeply affected, and this in turn has affected what I write. Up until then I'd mainly been influenced by those who stressed such Zen-like attitudes as "oneness," "nothing special," the "wordless poem," and so-called "egolessness" in haiku. Although I had responded to nature, I did so from these intellectual and aesthetic concepts, unaware of the larger reality of nature being poisoned and ravaged. Also, I realized that I'd spent thirty-seven years on earth man-watching and promoting male ideas (male art, etc.), and had hardly paid a bit of attention to what women had said or done. It was a traumatic experience to perceive all of this in myself, and led to my not wanting to help hold up the male sky any more. What's happening in my own writing is a result of a very personal quest — in part, I'm trying to sort through how and why I'd gotten so one-sided before, i.e., so male-

oriented. Not that I don't already know — we're all imbued with and consumed by patriarchy.

Over the years, to use a catch-all term, "social concerns," including the environment and peace/weapons, have appeared in my writing. To be swamped by "concerns" when one has been writing "nothing special" for many years is a pretty strange, rather awful, predicament. It was a huge conflict for me at first and for years following, and apparently for some fellow poets who don't like or understand my shift — not that I myself fully understood it at the time. As my visual consciousness and "political" awareness change, so do my haiku. What I try to do is to keep up with myself. I think haiku ought to be able to encompass all that is human. It will just take a bit of getting used to by some, as it has for me.

Weren't you the first to write erotic haiku?

I wrote a few in 1969 and 1970, but I think of Michael McClintock in later years as one who truly wrote powerful haiku about love and sex (as well as war). Perhaps I was the first, though, to write about personal aspects of sexuality on a continuing basis. And of more intimacy. Perhaps, too, the first woman. I consider the haiku I've written over the years — whether women's, "unaloud," other visual, 5-7-5, "dadaku," sexual, social/political/protest, anger, minimal — as just plain "moments". There are both advantages and disadvantages with using these other labels, but the main point, I think, is to stay open. Each of us has to find her own haiku, which to me means finding her own self.

Where did you get the ideas for some of these innovations, such as "unaloud" [unallowed] haiku and "dadaku"?

The "unaloud" haiku began about 1974 and over the next four or so years I wrote more than 70 of them, as well as other kinds of visual poems based on phrases rather than on single words. One of the first "unaloud" haiku, "raindrop,"* is rather obvious; others are more complex. The majority, again, were instant "moments keenly perceived," even though many took considerable time at the typewriter. Another early one was "violet."**
I suddenly saw the word itself within the flower — forming it. Sometimes the reverse would happen. As I was reading a word in a nature book or dictionary, I would see the shape of an animal or plant, or some aspect of it.

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*  rain                    ** v       i
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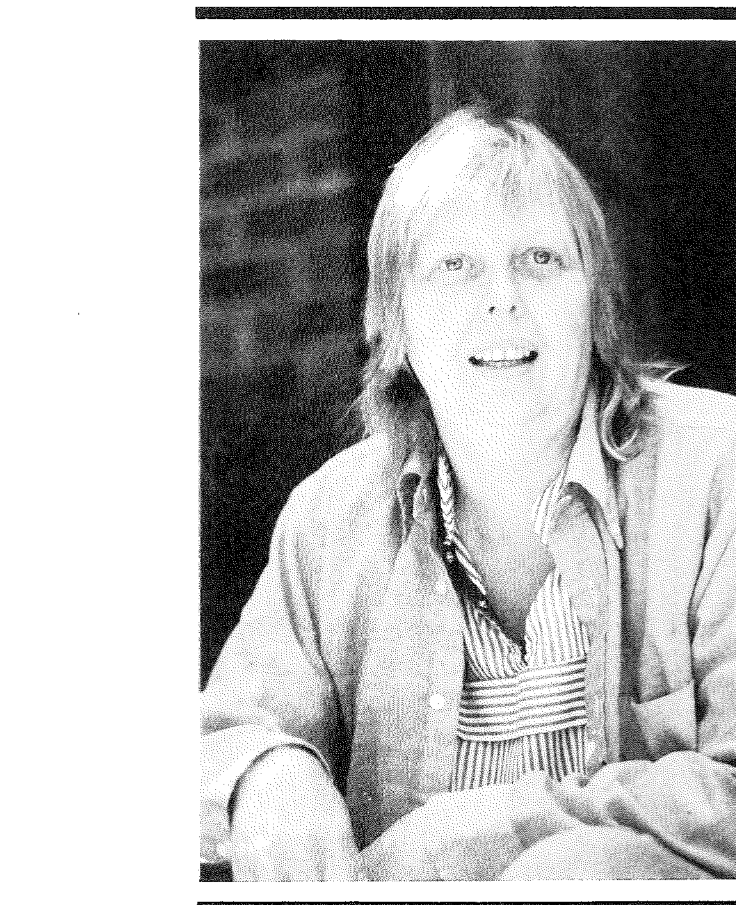

RICHARD H. CONNORS

The "dadaku" also began around this time. I loosely defined them as spoofing some of the "rules" of haiku, in particular as related to Westerners blindly adopting the 5-7-5 syllable "form". "Dada" (French for "hobby horse") is, of course, the "anti-art" movement as exemplified by Marcel Duchamp and others, and *ku* in Japanese means "phrase." Later on, I also spoofed some haiku of "the Masters," and more recently *kigo*, or season words.

Also around this time I began working with what I call "tear outs" (nature words and shapes from magazines pasted on paper). All of these approaches helped me get away from the typed three lines and back into the random placement of words — and, moreover, back to an interest in one-line haiku. Some of the "tearouts" have collage shapes with a typed one-line haiku. All of this led to my first book of haiku, *the old tin roof*.

What's the advantage of writing in one line in English haiku? Japanese haiku is, of course, traditionally written in one line — albeit with the familiar 5-7-5 syllable/sound breaks — but your "at dusk hot water from the hose" is frequently anthologized as an example of one of the first (and finest) "one-liners" in English.

I don't like the term "one-liners." If I didn't think that haiku as a genre needed some of the content I've added to it, I might just say that I write "one-liners" and simplify a lot of things. But, I prefer to call them haiku. Over the years thinking in one-line has become natural and automatic. Once in a while I feel something in three lines, but I usually don't bother to write it; I figure it will come out as one-line eventually. I also like writing in one line because there's no fussing around with how a haiku looks — it's just there. At various times I've used extra spacing between words or phrases, but not for many years; and I also try to avoid punctuation and capital letters. After writing a lot of minimal haiku, many of the "new content" haiku got longer — though I try to keep the letters/spaces to sixty or less. Yes, I sometimes count those — but not syllables! — because most haiku magazines can't handle long lines, so a word or two is dropped to the next line, which looks odd. It seems ridiculous to have to base a poem on the size of a magazine page. At the same time the limitation does keep one aware of using the fewest words possible.

How about your haiku sequences? They also seem to go beyond a minimalist approach and yet are actually quite different from traditional renga *[linked verse]*

My first haiku sequence was published in *Modern Haiku* in 1971 [which won a prize].