

Reading & Relishing

Edited by Robyn Rowland

Like many poets, women poets in particular, I find the time to read poetry is constantly squeezed between snatched moments to write and the full tide of domesticity. It's interesting though, to have a look inside the reading lives of poets. Often, they give us directions in which our own reading might follow; often they introduce us to books and authors never discovered unless by word-of-mouth: our own e-mag. This section is a brief musing by a poet each month on their own reading of poetry, particularly the work they are enjoying. Hopefully, you'll want to go out and buy some more poetry!

This month our contribution comes from Perth poet **Andrew Lansdown**.



Andrew is a poet, novelist and essayist with fifteen published books to his name. His poems, stories and essays have appeared in more than 70 magazines and newspapers, and are represented in over 70 anthologies. He won the 1985 WA Premier's Award for his poetry collection *Windfalls* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press). He won the 1994 Adelaide Festival's John Bray National Poetry Award for this book *Between Glances* (William Heinemann Australia). His most recent books are: a collection of poetry titled *Fontanelle* (Five Islands Press); a collection of short stories titled *The Dispossessed* (Interactive

Press); and three fantasy novels titled *With My Knife*, *Dragonfox* and *The Red Dragon* (Omnibus Books/ Scholastic Australia).

Andrew Lansdown. Reading and reflecting on Haiku

In recent weeks I have been reading R.H. Blyth's *A History of Haiku* (Volume One). The two volumes of *A History of Haiku* follow Blyth's monumental four volumes, *Haiku* (which I have managed to purchase through Amazon.com, but have not yet managed to read).

A History of Haiku is an impressive work. Blyth's knowledge of haiku and of English literature is comprehensive and masterful. Much of the book consists of translations of haiku followed by succinct (and sometimes terse) observation about them. By this process of translation and analysis, Blyth slowly builds up an impression of the nature and function of haiku. Here a commendation, there a condemnation, everywhere an illumination. And while some of his observations are provocative, all are profitable—all help to instil a sense of what haiku are and how they work.

I have particularly enjoyed Blyth's two chapters on Yosa Buson (1716-1784), the greatest haiku master after Matsuo Basho (1644-1694). Interestingly, Buson disproves a notion prevalent among haiku enthusiasts today—namely, that there is no place for literary devices and techniques in haiku. (Blyth himself does not address this erroneous notion because it was not a notion that was abroad in the 1950s and 1960s when he wrote his works.)

Buson often uses metaphor. Indeed, sometimes the metaphor is the sum of the haiku, as in the following three:

The narcissus flower,—
A beautiful woman
With an aching head.

The colour and scent
Of her retreating figure,—
Departing spring.

Swallowing the clouds,
Spitting out the petals,—

Mountains of Yoshino!

The particular form of metaphor used in the above three haiku is personification. But other instances of metaphor do not involve personification. For example, in the following haiku, Buson asserts that the small white-capped waves passing over the lake are rabbits:

The bright autumn moon;
Rabbits crossing over
The lake of Suwa.

This fantastic association of waves with rabbits—rabbits scampering over a lake in the moonlight, no less!—hints at something else that Buson is fond of doing in his haiku: making up completely fanciful characters and imaginary situations. He has water spirits making love under the moon and bandit chieftains singing songs under the moon. Here he has a crotchety bamboo (personification again!) telling him to keep to himself and to expect no fondness from nature:

“Put up with your own foolishness!”
Says the bamboo, heavy with snow,
Darkening the window.

It is interesting to note Buson’s use of dialogue in the above haiku, and again in the one below:

“A lodging for the night!”
Coming in out of the blizzard
He dashes down his sword.

This haiku is a narrative poem. It has dialogue and dramatic action. That’s some achievement for a three-line, seventeen-syllable poem! Blyth points out that in the Japanese this haiku is rich in sound: “We have here: *ya, ka, ka, ta, na, na, da, ka, na*, giving the sinister meaning of the demand.” Buson, it seems, loved to use alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia. Blyth points this out again and again. For example, of one haiku he states, “This verse is nothing much in translation, but the sound of it, *ha, ma, ya, a, ta; tsu, u, u, ru; mo, no; ri, ni, hi*, gives us a feeling of the harmonious warmth of spring.”

Fortunately, when I first became interested in haiku I never knew of the existence of haiku societies and haiku magazines and haiku feuds. So it never occurred to me that haiku

was anything other than another form of poetry, and as such subject to the same literary standards and open to the same literary possibilities as other forms of poetry.

If I remember correctly, it was the West Australian poet and novelist, Hal Colebatch, who introduced me to the haiku in 1975. His first collection of poems, *Spectators on the shore*, contained two sets of haiku, “Dune Haiku” and “Breakwater Haiku”. Of the ten haiku in these two sets, I particularly like these three:

Cranes and pelicans
at the distant salt-marsh edge
stand pale in silver.

(Small sounds are alive:
the click of bird or seed-pod
or a rifle cocked.)

Rats in dim lamplight
blend on the stone like bits
of windblown darkness.

I was fascinated by the idea of a complete poem in such a short form. Fancy writing poems that express all that needs to be expressed in just seventeen syllables arranged in just three lines!

After learning of the existence of haiku from Hal, I searched the university library and found a book on haiku history and theory written by Harold G. Henderson called *An Introduction to Haiku*. Henderson’s study was a delight and revelation to me, although he did some quirky things, such as translating the haiku of the masters in rhyme and giving each one a title. This use of rhyme weakens many of the translations. But not all of them. Consider this translation of a haiku by Basho, which Henderson has titled “Beauty”:

The usually hateful crow:
he, too—this morning,
on the snow!

Or consider this haunting translation of a haiku by one of Basho’s disciples, Shiko, which Henderson has titled “Maple Leaves”:

Envied by us all,
 turning to such loveliness—
 red leaves that fall.

Happily, Henderson did not always resort to rhyme in his translations. One of my favourites of his non-rhyming translations is this one by Basho:

On a withered branch
 a crow has settled—
 autumn nightfall.

This is a stunning example of haiku's ability to paint a vivid picture, convey a mood and suggest a significance through simple, precise description. And it is an example of the use of meaningful ambiguity—ambiguity that does not confuse meaning, but rather opens it up to several compatible interpretations. Is the night settling like a crow? Or, is a crow settling like the night? Or, are both things happening simultaneously and serendipitously? All are possible interpretations of the text and none does violence to the other.

I began writing haiku soon after learning about them. I published my first haiku, a set of four under the title "Bird Haiku", in 1977, in *Quadrant* magazine. Since then, I have published in excess of a hundred haiku in various magazines and newspapers, including *Blue Dog*, *The Canberra Times*, *Imago*, *Island*, *Meanjin*, *Quadrant* (which published 60 under the title "A Shoal of Haiku" in 2004), *Southern Review*, *The Weekend Australian* and *Westerly*. ABC Radio National has also broadcast my haiku from time to time, most recently in a two-part series on "Australian Haiku" produced by Ron Sims *Poetica*.

All of my nine poetry collections have included some haiku, while the short collection *Warrior Monk* (Picaro Press, 2005) consists entirely of 22 haiku sequences. Here's the title sequence:

Warrior Monk

i

A warrior-monk,
 the heron stands at the brink
 of the floating world.

ii

Spear at the ready
 the heron warrior-monk
 meditates on death.

iii

Meditation, step
 the heron warrior-monk
 resignation, stab.

iv

The grey heron's koan:
 the monk and the warrior,
 how can they combine?

In September, Picaro Press republished my poetry collection, *Waking and Always*, which was first released by William Collins/Angus & Robertson in 1987. The book is published as part of Picaro Press's Art Box Series, which "aims to provide low-cost access to significant Australian poetry titles which, for whatever reason, are no longer generally available to the public."

There are only 17 haiku in *Waking and Always*, but one of these is one of my favourites. It stands alone and bears the title, "On Haiku". It reads:

Haiku are pebbles
 poets lob into the pond
 of our emotions.

This summarises my understanding of how haiku work and expresses my aim in writing them.

References

- R.H. Blyth, *A History of Haiku: Volume One*, The Hokuseido Press, 1963, rpt 1984
 Hal Colebatch, *Spectators on the shore*, Edwards and Shaw, 1975
 Harold G. Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku*, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958

Andrew Lansdown, *Warrior Monk*, Picaro Press, 2005

Andrew Lansdown, *Waking and Always* (new edition), Picaro Press 2008