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Museum of Haiku  
Literature Award

Haiku & Senryu

Revelations Unedited

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From the Editors

# revelations unedited

**About Revelations: Unedited** — For each issue, we will invite a different poet to reveal trade secrets or pet peeves or whatever else he or she wants to say. By "Unedited," we mean exactly that—there will be no run-through in the test kitchen. The poet will have total freedom, but, of course, with that will also come total responsibility.

Editor George Swede invited me to submit a "revelations unedited" for Frogpond, and I agreed to write a two-part revelations piece on my theory of writing haiku. My own theory comes from a blend of aesthetics of the global haiku tradition as well as my graduate studies in rhetorical theory. In this first part I will take up the theoretical question about the genesis of discourse—where do haiku come from? In rhetorical theory, this is known as "invention" in the writing process.

In the second part, I will address three broader theories of writing—the objective, the subjective, and the transactional—and how each leads to different assumptions about the writer, the reader, reality and language in the conjoined twin arts of reading and writing haiku. Although I am taking up questions of haiku writing theory, my approach will be to tell the personal story of my journey through these questions as a haiku writer, editor, publisher and teacher.

## GENESIS OF HAIKU: WHERE DO HAIKU COME FROM? (The First of Two Parts)

by Dr. Randy Brooks, Millikin University, Illinois

### Part 1

As an undergraduate student at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, before I discovered haiku, I was immersed in contemporary poetry—Robert Bly, Gary Snyder, Robert Creeley, Sylvia Plath—and enjoyed studying the modernist poets such as William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. However, as a Latin minor, I was also very interested in translating epigrams and reading fragments of Greek lyric poetry. My honors thesis was on western traditions of the short poem—comparing the ability of Greek lyric poetry to convey emotional intensity with the epigram, which more typically conveys witty satire. I became aware of the primary goals of the western short poem to bring readers to tears or laughter. In my final semester at Ball State I won the student writing award and immediately took my prize money to the bookstore where I bought collections of short poetry, including two anthologies of haiku: *The Haiku Anthology* edited by Cor van den Heuvel, and *Modern Japanese Haiku* translated and edited by Makoto Ueda. You could say that my understanding of haiku initially "came from" these two books purchased in May of 1976.

One of the most interesting parallels I found between *The Haiku Anthology* and *Modern Japanese Haiku* is that both editors enthusiastically celebrated bringing unknown contemporary haiku to the reading public. Ueda states that "Many of the leading haiku poets of modern Japan still remain obscure in the West; some of them have not had a single haiku translated into a western language. This book is intended to help narrow the gap" (p. vii). Cor van den Heuvel asserts in his introduction, "Until now, the poets represented in this anthology have been largely 'invisible.' Though some of them have been writing haiku for nearly two decades or longer, their work has flowered practically unnoticed" (p. xxvii). I was fascinated with these contemporary haiku and the variety of approaches to writing haiku represented by the included authors. I realized that the haiku tradition was a vibrant, living

literary tradition with a wide range of authors exploring the possibilities of the art for our own times. I started writing haiku in my journal that summer after graduation and have continued ever since. I enjoyed the variety of contemporary voices in these two haiku collections, and I began imitating favorite haiku by Kawahigashi Hekigodô, Ozaki Hôsai, and Michael McClintock.

For example, I appreciated this haiku by McClintock, which I read in the context of the Vietnam war:

dead cat . . .  
open-mouthed  
to the pouring rain

*The Haiku Anthology*, 1974, p. 83.

For me, this haiku put me on the battle field, with the pouring rain being both rain and bullets. The dead "cat" was an American GI lying in the rain, with his mouth open, just as it was when he died crying out in agony. The battle is too hot for the body to be retrieved yet. Of course this haiku can also be read as being about a literal dead cat in someone's yard, with its fur matted down in the rain, having died while crying out. With either reading, it presents a cold, dark, haunting image of death that chills the reader to the bone. I've always liked this haiku for its ability to convey silence. When I read this haiku to students, it always gets a powerful immediate "ugh" response as well as longer-lasting imagined associations and memories of confronting death. The haiku has both impact and resonance. What more could we want from any work of literary art? I wanted to write haiku as powerful and evocative as that haiku.

### **Imitation and the Intertextuality of Haiku**

One source of the genesis of haiku is simply reading (and enjoying) the haiku that have been written before. Then we imitate or rewrite what we have read, based on our own lives and cultural perspective. This is simple and natural on one level—we imitate the literary art that we read. We want to create literary art like the literary art we have enjoyed—that has moved us to tears or laughter or to an understanding. On the other hand, imitation is complex and genuinely worthy of being considered on a theoretical level. Literary art is never simply a matter of imitation. For quality literary art, the writer must go beyond merely imitating techniques or language or images seeking similar effects, in order to create a new literary work, in order to "make it new." The challenge is not merely replication nor translation of an old poem from the past, but creation of something new that responds to the writer's own time, the writer's own cultural perspective, the writer's values, thoughts, emotions, and so forth. This theoretical tension between the tradition and individual talent is healthy for the vitality of any art, including haiku. On one level, we are always rewriting something that has come before (the tradition of known works). What we write comes "out of" what has been written before. On another level, we are always writing something new that has never existed before. This is often referred to as "intertextuality" which means that part of the genesis of haiku is how it revises or comes from previous texts.

Intertextuality of texts and quality imitation depend on a collection of commonly-known texts, which is sometimes referred to as "the canon" of a literary tradition. These known examples of excellence establish standards of quality expected from the subsequent rewrites and imitations. For example, Bashô's frogpond haiku has that "here is the prototypical famous example of a haiku" quality,

as evidenced in books such as Hiroaki Sato's *One Hundred Frogs* collection of translations and variations. For the most part, the Japanese tradition of haiku has an established canon of venerated haiku writers—Bashō, Issa, Buson, Shiki—but the English-language tradition is relatively new and has only a few haiku writers who have emerged as examples of great writers in this literary art. This is both a blessing and a curse because "the canon" of any literature is always constructed to privilege and omit certain voices in the culture (often women and other social or political outsiders) or time periods (such as old Japan). The haiku tradition is blessed with the undefined openness for many contemporary voices and perspectives. But it is also cursed because so many high-quality haiku writers are unknown. Therefore, the haiku community always appears to be an outsider to the "mainstream" of literature defined as a series of well-known great writers.

Who are your great contemporary haiku writers? Why don't we have the dominating genius writers who are venerated as the top exemplars of the art of writing haiku? In part, I believe that the answer to this question is the special collaborative nature of the tradition. Haiku is not a tradition based on a limited number of venerated great writers. Instead it is a tradition of social collaboration, a tradition of active participation between readers and writers in a collaborative creative process. In other words, the very nature of the haiku tradition is to be able to contribute high quality literary art, without an established tradition or name recognition. In fact, the idea that the writer of the haiku is anonymous or unknown is a fundamental part of the democratic ideal of haiku as accessible and valued for its universal humanity rather than being the province of the elite few—whether they are elite by virtue of social class, education, or a coterie of critics who act as gatekeepers of a literary canon.

### **Haiku as a Collaborative Co-creative Act**

The haiku tradition has emerged from linked verse traditions, so the concept that haiku are born as a collaborative act of creation shared by writer and reader has always been valued. Haiku are often created in response to or imitation of a previous work, which in turn is read and imagined resulting in the writing of another link or haiku. As Makoto Ueda explained in *Modern Japanese Haiku*, "Any poem demands a measure of active participation on the part of the reader, but this is especially true of haiku. With only slight exaggeration it might be said that the haiku poet completes only one half of his poem, leaving the other half to be supplied in the reader's imagination" (p. vii). On a very fundamental level, I would argue that haiku "come from" this creative union of the writer and reader, an imaginative act of discovering significance together. The haiku experience is not something that occurs when the haiku is written; it occurs when the written haiku finds a reader who fully imagines it in order to fulfill its promise as a gift of realization, insight or feeling.

Haiku have often been characterized as gifts of insight or awareness or perception from the writer to be opened and enjoyed by the reader. Each haiku offers the promise of discovery of a resonating feeling—if you give it a fully imagined reading, if you let yourself enter into its space of perceptions, if you are open to its insight and feel the emotional significance of its moment, if you let it touch your own life memories and associations, if you play with the language and silences of the haiku, if you let it come alive, and if you let it touch your own life memories and associations, if you play with the language and silences of the haiku, if you let it come alive, and if you let yourself come alive while holding it in your heart and mind for a moment. Once you have entered into that

collaborative union with the haiku as a reader, you can't help but want to "give back" by writing haiku in response. You want to write haiku that are gifts for others to open and enter into the imaginative space they provide. Many haiku come from the desire to recreate that haiku experience of union between reader and writer.

This emphasis on co-creation of meaning has become a central part of my teaching haiku at Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois. One of the Japanese traditions I have adopted for teaching haiku is based on the distinction between editing workshops versus the celebratory enjoyment of discovering excellent new works to be admired. The Japanese usually have small groups of haiku writer friends who engage in editing sessions with each other, but when there are more public, social gatherings, they engage in *kukai*. As I understand it, in traditional *kukai* original haiku are submitted to the organizer who selects the best attempts for inclusion in the competition. In my classes I serve as the selector, so I place best attempts on a page with no names, then these are read out loud and enjoyed by everyone at the gathering. Each person selects a few favorites. Favorite haiku are noted and read out loud, then everyone can talk about what they love about that haiku. *Kukai* is not an editing session, so edit suggestions or comments about why someone does not like a haiku are not allowed. The point of *kukai* is to find haiku that are loved. The Japanese say that when the haiku finds a reader who loves it, that is the moment it is born. In my classes, after everyone has talked about why they like a haiku, a vote is taken to determine how many chose that haiku as a favorite. After the haiku is born, and only then, do we ask who wrote the haiku. When the newborn haiku is claimed by its author, there is applause (or snapping of fingers or tapping of pencils) to thank the writer for their gift. Then the group looks for another haiku waiting to be born. Authors of favorite haiku with the most votes receive awards of haiku books or magazines. Through *kukai*, writers and readers can experience the social nature of haiku. The significance or meaning exists not within the poem, but within those who take it to heart and imagine it and connect it to their own memories, associations and feelings of being alive. The genesis of haiku comes from the desire to share such memories, associations and feelings with potential future readers who will love the haiku.

### **The Haiku Muse?**

What about traditional western conceptions of inspiration for poetry? Do any of these apply to the haiku tradition? What are the sources of inspiration in writing haiku? What is the muse that inspires us to write haiku? These typical questions about inspiration and the western approach to the genesis of discourse seem very wrong-headed when applied to haiku. This approach assumes that the poet is an extremely gifted individual, inspired by the gods or possessing rare intuitive talent beyond rational explanation. Such writers are born, not taught—a genius with innate talents and gifts. How such writers come to be or where their great works come from is considered a mystery. We are not supposed to ask questions about how they achieved their miracles of creation. We are just supposed to be in awe of them and their amazing works.

These western myths of inspiration from the gods and gifted talents of the extraordinary heroic writer do not leave much room for a collaborative co-creation model of writing haiku. The heroic model places all of the power of creation on the writer, with little more than appreciative reception left for the reader. It is an imbalance that the haiku tradition has, fortunately, avoided for the most part. In haiku the gift is between the writer and reader, not something

the writer received at birth as a freak of nature making him "mantic" or "out of his right mind" or "overcome with inspiration," someone who writes with divine inspiration. The closest thing I've heard to this from the haiku community is the idea that if one is stoned or drunk they are inspired to write brilliant haiku, because they let go of inhibitions and write beyond what they can do in their "right mind." Of course, many of the haiku written from this approach to inspiration do not seem to be as good the next morning or day after when the writer sobers up.

If we take the idea of the muse as simply the idea of motivation to write, without the myth of the gifted heroic genius, what are the things that inspire us to write haiku? This is a legitimate question, worthy of exploration. When we face the blank page of a journal, what motivates us to write haiku, beyond the desire to get response? What guides our choices of topics, language, and images and therefore is our overall purpose for writing haiku? This essay is necessarily too short to address all of these related choices, but I will address a few of the concepts about motivation, at least on the broader level of topics and purposes.

### **Moments of Insight**

When I started writing, one of my mentors at Purdue University, Dr. Sanford Goldstein, discouraged me from writing haiku because of his description of the best haiku as moments of epiphany. More specifically, he argued that the best haiku came from moments of satori—life-changing moments of insight and awareness. Relating these satori moments to years of meditation in the Zen tradition, he believed that these moments are far and few between, so a person should only write three or four satori haiku in a lifetime. Now he may have been pulling my leg a bit and trying to persuade me to write tanka instead of haiku, but his point about the myth of the "aha moment" as a necessary element of every haiku is a genuine criticism. With tanka, Sanford argued, the writer can be autobiographical and directly express his or her emotions in the context of that autobiographical moment. To write ego-less haiku with a koan-like Zen insight, you have to be a Zen master.

The expectation that every haiku "comes from" such an insight or moment of awareness is very limiting. In fact, this is another version of the myth that haiku can only come from inspired moments of insight, available only to the most spiritually-aware writers. This tyranny of epiphany is as wrong-headed as the western conception of the poet as a gifted genius, although we have had several Japanese and English-language haiku writers who attempt to write from Zen meditation and Zen aesthetics. Zen aesthetics do not require that each haiku contain a satori moment, but a variation of it as a moment of "noticing an insight" is certainly an unspoken goal behind such aesthetics.

Don't get me wrong. I do believe that most haiku have a gift of discovery within them to be shared with the reader, but the nature of that discovery is not necessarily an epiphany or life-changing moment of satori. It may be simply a feeling or an observation or a perception of something interesting. So I continued to read and write haiku, filling up blank pages in my journal. Where did these haiku come from, besides the haiku I was reading? Fortunately, I found another mentor who taught me a great deal about writing haiku through our ongoing correspondence: Raymond Roseliep of Dubuque, Iowa. Instead of seeking moments of satori or epiphanies, he taught me to write haiku from "our own back yard" as evident in his short essay, "This Haiku of Ours" published in *Bonsai: A Quarterly of Haiku*, 1.3, July 1976. Roseliep wrote:

"I believe we are preserving the quintessence of haiku if we do what the earliest practitioners did: use it to express our own culture, our own spirit, our own enlightened experience, putting to service the riches of our land and language, summoning the dexterity of Western writing tools" (p. 12).

On the same page he goes on to describe the wealth of content we should be drawing on to create our haiku:

For subject matter we should dig into our own teeming country, God's plenty when it comes to materials: outer space discoveries, hairy youth, mini skirts, bell bottoms, roller skates, pizza, peanut butter, saucer sleds, circuses, our enormous bird fish animal & insect kingdoms, our homeland flowers-trees-plants-grains-vegetables-&-fruits, motorcycles, ships that plow the sky and deliver people to Japan—the storehouse is without walls. Practically everything under the sun is valid subject matter for haiku as for any poem, except that in haiku it is the affinity between the world of physical nature and the world of human nature that concerns us, and so we focus our images there. It's American images I'm advocating rather than the Japanese cherry blossoms, kimonos, rice, tea, temple bells, Buddhas, fans, and parasols that populate so many supposedly Western haiku; something is not quite right when our poems come out sounding like Eastern poems. Creation is still more exciting than imitation.

### **Consonance & Dissonance**

Writing theories often discuss the writer's purpose as motivated by a sense of dissonance—a feeling that things are not right, that something is wrong, that our knowledge is incomplete, that something is broken, that things are hopeless, that we must address an identified problem. Most scientific writing is based on this model of problem solving—filling in the gaps of knowledge, trying to explain the data that doesn't fit the theory, and so on. Most political writing is based on this model as well—proposing changes and actions to address the issue. Literature is often motivated by this underlying sense of dissonance—the protagonist in most fiction has to overcome a conflict. Plays and movies have a similar pattern of characters growing or changing by overcoming obstacles or surviving tragedies. Dissonance is a powerful motivator, and it is also common in haiku—as evident in haiku (and senryu) that address political or social issues. Dissonance is a common motivator for haiku dealing with difficult relationships and moments of grief, loss, terror and strong emotions. Some very powerful, moving haiku have come out of dissonance as a genesis of haiku.

While other types of literature briefly convey moments of consonance in contrast to the primary focus on dissonance, haiku actually can be written entirely out of consonance. These haiku express moments of beauty and completeness, a sense that everything is as it should be, a feeling that life is wonderful and should just be appreciated. Taken to an extreme, a large collection of haiku that all express such moments can appear to be too focused on pretty, "precious" moments. Such collections seem sentimental. It is the mix of consonance and dissonance in haiku that keep us on our toes as haiku readers.

In fact, some of the best-known Japanese aesthetics associated with haiku, such as wabi-sabi, include a mix of both feelings. SABI

emphasizes accepting the aloneness of the poet, a solitary person encountering and responding to the events and experiences of being alive. Wabi emphasizes the brokenness or worn-ness of things that are valued and treasured because they have a history of human use. They have added emotional significance based on associations and memories of those who used these things before us. Therefore, these aesthetics have the combined feelings of consonance or comfort of being with things well-worn by fellow humans, but the tint of brokenness and aloneness, the dissonance of our lives. Bashō is famous for his shifts in haiku aesthetics from his *sabi* phase to his final *karumi* phase—moving from the dissonance of existential aloneness to celebrating the consonance of being social. This tension between dissonance and consonance has been present in the haiku tradition from at least Bashō's time.

In David Lanoue's novel, *Haiku Guy*, the apprentice haiku writer, Buck-Teeth, gets advice from three haiku masters on writing haiku. Each emphasizes a different source of inspiration for the genesis of quality haiku. The black poet, Kuro, teaches Buck-Teeth that the best haiku come from "the shadow side of things: on death, loss, despair, and sorrow" (p. 43). Life is tragedy so you might as well accept it and embrace it as the best source for writing quality haiku. His advice is that "we must record the disaster, witness the tragedy. See the dead cats!" (p. 45). Buck-Teeth's second haiku master, the green poet, Mido, teaches him that "being a poet means you've got to go out of your mind! Drinking's just one way...." (p. 51). In this way the budding haiku poet can "unleash your raw voice, your true voice, the voice of your self beyond that scared, fictive imposter" (p. 52). The third haiku master, Shuro, the white poet, promotes a Zen approach based on the wordless poem. He pauses from time to time to absorb the moment but never writes a haiku on paper. He only thinks them. As Lanoue writes, "according to Shiro, language corrupts haiku. A poem in its pure form exists as a nonverbal insight called a 'dibbit,' a flash of wordless perfection that words can never capture" (p. 48). Through the fictional experiences of Buck-Teeth, Lanoue teaches us about the limitations of each of these approaches. In true haiku teaching style, Lanoue implies that each haiku poet will have to find their own best approach, their own source of inspiration, their own genesis of haiku.

## Conclusion

The subject or content of haiku is not a source for the genesis of haiku. Haiku do not come from things. Haiku do not come from direct experiences. We have many experiences that do not result in a haiku. Haiku do not come from cameras. Haiku are not snapshots. Haiku come from a writer sitting down to write a haiku. The haiku writer draws on all of his or her resources to write a haiku—previous examples of haiku, memories, associations, feelings, cultural perspectives, direct observation, imagination, word play. These are the haiku writer's tools, not the motivation nor process for inventing a haiku into being. Observation of the world we live in and awareness of our own inner states of consciousness and our own feelings are important in writing quality haiku, but they are not the source of where our haiku come from. Haiku come from our deliberate intention to write haiku, based on our intuitive responses to previous haiku and to awareness of our perceptions about being ALIVE in the world. They come from our whole selves—emotions, sensations, memories, language resources, social awareness, cultural contexts, values, and our own sense of significance in things and ideas we pay attention to. Haiku come from noticing and responding in the literary construct we call haiku.

I will conclude by discussing an example from one of my earliest

haiku, published in *Modern Haiku* issue 8.1 in 1977:

dirt farmer's wife  
at the screen door—  
no tractor sound

Where did this haiku come from? First of all, I was reading a lot of haiku in anthologies and haiku magazines, including translations by Makoto Ueda, R.H. Blyth, Harold Henderson and Lucien Stryk. So I was interested in the idea of writing haiku. I was especially intrigued by the power of silence and things unsaid in haiku and how haiku could focus on perceptions of emptiness and absence, such as Buson's imaginative haiku about stepping on the dead wife's comb. I began trying to write haiku about noticing things not there. I was writing a series of haiku about growing up in western Kansas, where I spent many summers helping my grandparents with the wheat harvest. I was trying very hard, without much success, to write haiku that were not merely descriptive but also emotionally evocative without being overt about the emotion. I wanted the emotion to be suggested by the actions and images within the haiku. Both of my grandparents farmed, but I was very aware of the differences in their lives. My mother's family were homesteaders who owned a ranch and kept a herd of cattle. My father's family were cash-rent farmers who depended on the success of each crop to pay the bills. I observed significant social and cultural differences in these two homes.

Of course, none of these things were the genesis of discourse for this haiku. This haiku did not come from these contexts and circumstances. It did not come from theoretical goals such as "objective correlative." This haiku came from me writing in my journal about a heartfelt memory of my grandmother who died in 1963 when I was nine years old. I remembered her in the little farm kitchen made from a porch on the front of a little Sears-Roebuck house. I remembered her in an apron, listening for grandpa to come in for breakfast after his early start in the field. I remembered the feeling on a day when she returned to the screen door several times to listen for his return, to listen for the sound of his tractor, a sound that usually was carried easily across the Kansas fields on the south wind to her house. I realized this was an image that contained a felt memory of her care and concern and love for my grandpa as his biscuits and eggs grew cold on the dining room table. As I wrote this haiku, I wanted it to connect to a broad audience, so that they could imagine it for themselves, so that they too could wonder why she could hear no tractor sound, so that they could continue the emotion inherent in her perceptions at the screen door. To let more readers into this haiku, I didn't write "my grandma / at the screen door." I wrote "dirt farmer's wife" which brought the social context and suggested the urgency of the tractor's success. I thought this distanced me as well—presenting her as more alone and isolated on the prairie, concerned about her absent companion. This haiku is not about being a grandson. It is about a wife watching over and caring for her farmer husband. I wanted to end with "no tractor sound" so that the haiku would be forever unresolved, left open to the reader to imagine the rest of the story.

For me, the genesis of haiku is writing a literary work of art in a tradition called haiku. In the writing of a haiku, I attempt to awaken my whole being's perceptions and awareness and feelings and memories of being alive in the world. If I have succeeded, I have invited readers to join in the co-creation of feelings and significance from their own responses to my haiku. In writing a haiku, the haiku writer starts with an act of literary imagination and leaves the door open for the reader to enter and add their own

imaginative, heartfelt response.



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