

## MY HAIKU PATH

by Cor van den Heuvel

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm honored to be here.<sup>i</sup> I am going to talk about my personal haiku path, a path I've been on since 1958-almost half a century. Before I came to it I'd already been trying for about ten years to be a writer. Pursuant to that ambition I had graduated from the University of New Hampshire with a degree in English Literature in 1957 and went to work as a newspaper reporter for the *Concord Monitor* in the state capital. After several months at this job I one day picked up a copy of the second issue of *The Evergreen Review* at a newsstand and read about the literary renaissance going on in San Francisco. The Bay Area poets Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, and Gary Snyder were among its major figures as were several of the Beat writers, including Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. The selections from their writings that were in the review were so innovative and refreshing that I determined to go to San Francisco to experience the renaissance personally.

I arrived in San Francisco in the early spring of 1958 and lived in a small residential hotel on the edge of Chinatown until late autumn, working at odd jobs-such as selling encyclopedias-and exploring the poetry scene in North Beach as often as I could. At the bar of a popular hangout for writers called The Place, I met one of the poets from the Duncan circle and was invited to attend their regular gatherings. It was at one of these meetings, usually comprising ten to twelve poets and led informally by Robert Duncan, that I first met Gary Snyder. He had recently returned from his first stay in Japan. I remember that he read a fairly long poem that compared the islands of Japan to a stone garden. It was so well liked that the other poets asked him to repeat it.

Another poet read some very short poems about dice. He used vivid metaphors, changing the dots on the dice into unusual images. I recall one of the single dots on "snake eyes" became the headlight of a motorcycle. Later, the group broke up into smaller units of two and three poets each sitting around the room. I was in a chair next to Snyder and the poet who had read the short poems. His name was Harold Dull. They were sitting on the floor looking at each other's notebooks and journals. I remember they were pleasantly surprised that they had both recorded the same image of

horses swinging their rumps into the wind. They talked a bit about turning journal notes into poems and then began to discuss the writing of short poems. Snyder mentioned haiku. It was the first time I'd heard anyone talk about haiku. I must have seen references to it when reading about the Imagists in college, but this was the first time the word "haiku" had caught my attention. Though my interest was aroused, I was quite reticent then, to the point of being reclusive-I had even written a series of poems about living as a hermit in the city-so I didn't take part in the discussion between the two poets. However, I had been impressed by what Snyder said and a day or two later I looked in the library for books on haiku. I was soon reading and studying R. H. Blyth's translations and those of Harold G. Henderson and Kenneth Yasuda.

Haiku seemed to embody the essence of what I had been looking for in poetry. I had been searching for the secret of turning words into things. I had found fragments of writing possessing this kind of magic in the prose of Henry Thoreau, Ernest Hemingway, and James Joyce and in the poetry of John Keats, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and William Carlos Williams. To my delight I now found it in Blyth's translations of Basho, Buson, Issa, and Shiki. The secret seemed to lie in the combining of simple description with naming, then refining the result into elements of pure suggestion. The words would then call up an image in the mind that had not only the ontological thrust of real existence, but elicited from the reader an emotional conviction that he was one with the things that comprised that image and by extension one with all of being, all of nature-all of the universe. After my discovery in San Francisco, I soon returned to the East coast and by the early spring of 1959 I was living alone in a small cottage in Wells Beach, Maine, trying to write my own haiku.

The first haiku I wrote was written sometime in the winter of 1958-59. I included it in my first chapbook, *sun in skull*, a small collection of haiku I published in 1961:

behind snow-covered boards  
the carousel's contoured ponies  
leap into silence

One can see that I was still using western poetic practices in my attempts at haiku. If I were writing about this particular image today, I would probably not use the adjective "contoured." Its use here is poetic, trying to

capture the beauty of the carved horses with a colorfully descriptive word. The word is also used to add some interesting sound effects, its initial "c" works alliteratively with those in "covered" and "carousel" and its "d" is echoed in three other places. "Contoured" also contributes an interesting rhythm. Taking out the word might make the poem simpler and more like what I now believe a haiku should be, but it would not make it a better poem. Old poets should be wary about revising the works of their youth.

I tend to believe now that the best haiku are the simplest. What beauty there is will be plain and unstated. If the poet is consciously trying to create a beautiful picture, invent a clever figure of speech, or fashion an elaborate sound effect, he will distract the reader's attention from the image itself. To paraphrase Blyth: a bejeweled finger pointing at the moon may itself become the center of attention instead of what it is pointing at.

Another poem in that first book shows I was also still interested in surrealistic-like juxta-positions, another carryover from western poetics:

two cows  
graze on the common  
a train steams into the album

It is also obvious that here too I was playing with the sounds, particularly the "m" sounds. Though the use of mellifluous language and surrealistic juxtapositions may have a legitimate place in haiku, I think my path in haiku has been moving in a direction away from them.

The summer of 1959 I worked as the house poet at the Cafe Zen in Ogunquit, Maine, reading my own haiku and other poems. That fall and winter I worked in Boston at the Salamander Cafe, reading poetry several nights a week, and later at the Alhambra where I read with a jazz trio. From there I went to Provincetown where I worked through the summer of 1960 on a fishing trawler during the day and read my poetry at night in a local bar. In the autumn I went to New York City. I lived in Greenwich Village and became involved with the Tenth Street Coffee House poetry readings. In 1961 after publishing my first chapbook, printing it myself on a small handpress, I hiked and hitchhiked across country from Maine to Seattle, taking notes for haiku and trying to write them. On my return to New York City, while continuing on my haiku path and again living in Greenwich Village, I married, started working at *Newsweek* magazine as a layout technician, and in 1965 had a son, Dirk. In 1971 I discovered the Haiku Society of America which held its meetings in New York City. There I

met William J. Higginson, Anita Virgil, Alan Pizzarelli and a number of other writers who were to become important American haiku poets.

During this time I continued to write haiku and to self-publish my chapbooks. In 1963 I put out *The Window-Washer's Pail*. The title poem reflects my urban environment and shows me moving towards a more simple, objective style of haiku:

high above the city  
dawn flares  
from a window-washer's pail

Another haiku from *The Window-Washer's Pail* with a simple image of the everyday is :

through the small holes  
in the mailbox  
sunlight on a blue stamp

This mailbox was in a New York City apartment house and was one of a series of such boxes in the vestibule next to the front door. Such metal boxes have a small area of open gridwork in them so its owner can see if there is any mail inside before they open the box. The spring or summer sunlight is shining in to the vestibule from the street and into these small openings.

However, in this book I have still not totally abandoned a surrealistic approach. As you can see from the following haiku:

the windshield-wipers  
vanish over the horizon  
Geronimo leaps to his horse

Geronimo was of course a famous war chief of the Apache Indians.

But the book also contains one of my most minimalist and simple haiku:

dawn  
among rocks  
lights water

I now feel it may be too minimalist. It becomes a general image rather than a specific one. We don't know from the poem whether the rocks are along a seacoast with tidepools among them or by a mountain stream or any of several other possible scenarios. At the time I thought such ambiguity desirable. Now I tend not to think so. But I may change my mind again.

My next book, in 1964, *E07 (or Christ should have carried a pearl-handled revolver)*, was a long sequence made up of short poems influenced by haiku and a few actual haiku, one of which was among my earliest one-line haiku:

a dixie cup floats down the Nile

Dixie cups were ubiquitous in America through most of the 20th century. Small paper cups used for soft drinks, for water from coolers, and even to hold ice-cream, they appeared in out of the way places all around the world—just as Coca-Cola is everywhere today. This haiku, too, carries a faint touch of the surreal though it is about something that could have actually happened.

I next published two chapbooks, in 1966 and 1969, that contained sequences linking short haiku-like poems with page-length free verse poems. In the early 1970s I was busy putting together and trying to publish the first edition of *The Haiku Anthology*. After its publication in 1974 I moved to New Jersey for three years and then to a small cabin next to a lake in northern New York where I lived from 1977 to 1980. All this time I commuted into New York City to *Newsweek*, where I was lucky to have a job that often required me to be there only three or four days a week. During this period I published my haiku only in haiku magazines. I had divorced my first wife in 1971 and in 1982 I married my present wife, Leonia Larrecq. That same year I published a haiku chapbook called *dark*. The few haiku in it, only thirteen, represented the best of what I'd written until then and indicates where I was at that time on my haiku path.

I'll read several of them.

November evening  
the wind from a passing truck  
ripples a roadside puddle

This haiku could have come from several different periods of my life when

I hiked and hitchhiked in various parts of the United States. In the 1970s I continued to find time to go hiking and backpacking: in the Catskill and Adirondack Mountains in New York and the White Mountains in New Hampshire. The scene for this haiku is either a back road or a lonely highway.

The next is one of my first intentional one-line haiku. That is it was meant to stand alone. Before this the few one-liners I'd written had been part of sequences.

the shadow in the folded napkin

After trying to find another element to resonate with this image to make a three line haiku, I finally decided, with the encouragement of Anita Virgil, that the image could stand alone. It didn't need anything else. I began to think of one-image and one-line haiku as a part of my approach to haiku. There is almost always something else in the experience of the reader that will resonate, if only sub-consciously, with a single image-if that image is striking and evocative enough. One may think of it as an invisible metaphor.

The next haiku from *dark* could represent a large number of my haiku: those having to do with the sea and the life and objects found along its shores. I grew up in Maine and New Hampshire not far from the Atlantic Ocean and I have spent several weeks on the Maine coast almost every year for the last half-century.

a tidepool  
in a clam shell  
the evening sunlight

The next poem is from New York City. I saw this in an antique store on Third Avenue one rainy spring day. Perhaps I should explain that in the 19th and early 20th centuries a wooden Indian was placed in front of a cigar and tobacco store to indicate what kind of store it was. The Indian was usually depicted with his right hand shielding his eyes, as if he were looking for something in the distance.

shading his eyes  
the wooden Indian looks out

at the spring rain

The following haiku, a one-liner, comes from my backpacking in the Catskill Mountains.

a stick goes over the falls at sunset

The next could be a city haiku, but it is really, in my mind, a small town image. Something you might imagine in a painting by Edward Hopper.

autumn twilight  
in the closed barbershop  
the mirrors darken

The last haiku I'll quote from *dark* was written when I lived in that cabin by a lake in upstate New York.

the sun goes down  
my shovel strikes a spark  
from the dark earth

Since I published *dark* in 1982, I have written many haiku, but aside from the haiku that were in a small chapbook of haibun called *Puddles* published in 1990 and those in a book of baseball haiku that came out in 1999 they have appeared only in magazines or in anthologies. I started writing haibun in the mid 1970s and have published many of them in haiku magazines. My haiku have continued to move in the direction of simplicity and objectivity and to end my talk I will read a few haiku written in the last ten years that I think demonstrate that tendency.

Here are two of my baseball haiku :

picking up my glove  
from the shade in right field  
its coolness

after the game  
a full moon rises  
over the left field fence

The following haiku was chosen as the title poem for the anthology commemorating the Haiku North America conference held in Boston in

2001.

the rusted paperclip  
has stained my old poem  
wind in the eaves

I'll finish with a very recent haiku that is reminiscent of my very first haiku-  
the one about the carousel :

deep snow  
one light  
in the amusement park

Thank you.

- i Cor van den Heuvel delivered this address to the International Haiku Convention in Matsuyama, Japan, sponsored by the Ehime Cultural Foundation, on the occasion of his being awarded the Masaoka Shiki International Haiku Award for 2002.