

Envoy 4 Comments

(8.10.09 – 8.21.09)

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Submitted on [2009/08/10 at 7:47pm](#)

Comment

Watanabe says this

この句を読んで、私たちは、
戦争が、「廊下」という家の中のテリトリーの中にまで、
気付かないうちに忍び寄るものなのだということ、
そしてその戦争は、座っているのでもよこたわっているのでもなく、
「立っている」ものということ。

そのまま、こちらに向かって歩き出してこれたら、
逃げられない距離に、それが立っていることの恐怖。

廊下の闇を見て、特に怖いドラマや映画をみたあとは

「ここに誰かがいたら怖いなあ」と思うけれど、
そのような感覚に、〈戦争〉をスライドさせて重ねることで
誰にもその恐怖が実感される。

もちろんミニマムなものであったとしても、
それは自らの命を脅かされるといった類の恐怖で、
戦争を実際には知らない世代の私にとっても、
この句を読むと、からだの芯があおざめるような感覚がある。

『渡邊白泉句集』より。

<http://sternskarte.blog.drecom.jp/archive/406>

Scott Metz

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67.42.214.44

Submitted on [2009/08/10 at 10:30pm](#)

thanks, Gabi. does an English translation exist?

also, are these Watanabe's words or someone else's from the intro to a book/
collection of his work?

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Submitted on [2009/08/10 at 10:51pm](#)

Hi Scott,

the quotation says “渡邊白泉句集 yori”, from the haiku collection of Watanabe

Hakusen, but I do not have the book to check.

Also, I am not sure if there is an English translation of this text somewhere.

Gabi

Paul Miller

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Submitted on [2009/08/11 at 10:03am](#)

A lot of interesting questions are asked here, but to me the most interesting is “If we want to stop the atrocities of war and their destructive repercussions, shouldn't we be writing about it then, instead of, say, birds and baseball?” Which is another way of asking: what is the purpose of our poetry? Personally, I don't think it is about trying to change the world. I am reminded of Paul Rep's poem “Drinking / a bowl of green tea / i stopped the war” which while a charming poem, and very clever, doesn't actually change the world in the least. True, by drinking tea instead of picking up a gun Paul did take himself out of the fray, but war is more complicated than the prevailing notion that people simply need to be educated. Any one man can take himself out of the fray for an hour, but a whole lot more still need to produce things like food, shelter, the airplane that got Paul Reps to Japan in the first place, etc. . . And those goals often produce conflict over resources. Books, modern medicine, anything you can think of were created because someone wanted more than they had (how like the animal kingdom—yet we don't pass judgment on lions competing over space). Political screed aside, I think I write (and read) poetry to see how I fit into the real world—of which war is a natural part. That's what the Watanabe poem is, him being confronted by his world, and the war that was literally on his front porch . . . and telling us all how he fit.

Allan Burns

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[71.38.3.40](#)

Submitted on [2009/08/11 at 11:40am](#)

A few thoughts in response to the same passage by Scott that Paul (Miller) responded to:

“Why don’t we see more haiku/senryu being written on these topics that affect our lives, the lives of others, and our environment? If we want to stop the atrocities of war and their destructive repercussions, shouldn’t we be writing about it then, instead of, say, birds and baseball?”

First off, birds are part of the environment. In viewing, learning, and writing about them, one is engaging the environment in a specific, not a general, abstract way—which is also the typical way of haiku.

Second, writing haiku is not going to stop anything, whether it’s war or environmental catastrophes. But it will say something about our own interests, commitments, values.

Third, I’ve seen quite a few haiku/senryu in the journals that engage social topics, environmentalism, and war in various ways. There have been quite a few about the Iraq War and some are quite good, such as this one by Katherine Cudney:

letter from Iraq
a birdsong spelled
phonetically

(The Heron’s Nest 6.6, 2004; reprinted New Resonance 4)

There you have it: war & birds (environmental awareness) in the same poem.

John J. Dunphy is a haikuist who sort of specializes in social themes, and Johnny Baranski’s prison haiku engage pertinent social themes as well. Just a few further exs.

Fourth—where do we draw the line between art and propaganda? That’s a distinction, no doubt a messy one, that seems worth exploring in response to these questions.

Allan Burns

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[71.38.3.40](#)

Submitted on [2009/08/11 at 11:53am](#)

Also, from the current Montage:

sun dogs
on the winter horizon...
another body count

–Francine Banwarth (Washington Poets Association Haiku Contest, 2007, First Prize)

This one could also be said to combine environmental and war consciousness. I love the way she invests a meteorological phenomenon with a new layer of meaning, so that “dogs” here can hardly help but make an alert reader think of “the dogs of war”—which also happens to be a cool literary allusion.

Scott Mason

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Submitted on [2009/08/11 at 1:48pm](#)

The same passage discussed above by Paul Miller and Allan Burns struck me, in part, as a gratuitous swipe at two of the more noteworthy haiku publishing projects of recent years: Wingbeats (Barlow & Paul, ed.) and Baseball Haiku (van den Heuvel & Tamura, ed.). Whether one enjoyed those books — as great many of us have — or not, they at least deserve a nod for their thoughtful approach to an important element of our natural environment (in the first instance) and popular culture (in the second). Besides that, they offer moments of wonderment and even — dare I say it — fun.

But the most ominous aspect of Scott Metz’ declaration is this: by suggesting that a prescribed type of haiku subject matter is somehow more legitimate or worthy in these times, he steps perilously close to donning the mantle of the “Secret/Thought police” he seems to decry in the very preceding paragraph of his commentary. Why stop at birds and baseball; why not also detonate all those Buddha haiku...

Dan Schwerin

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Submitted on [2009/08/11 at 3:29pm](#)

Thanks for this dialogue. You have me thinking of Orwell—and that art is propaganda. Then Frost claiming poetry is a stay against confusion. So, if art is for something—to order, or reveal beauty, or influence—haiku like any art will take us places that artists choose to go. I pray we are taken to appreciate birds and nature and the atrocities of war. Aren’t the great haiku able to take us more deeply into the world? Time? The self?

If an aesthetic we share is makoto—and I think I am butchering that word—then an aim we have is truthfulness. I appreciate haiku because it is not a slow moving novel or predictable potboiler. If we are honest, haiku is both—the best truthfulness we can muster that moment and propaganda—just as conflicted as the people who write them.

Merrill Ann Gonzales

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Submitted on [2009/08/11 at 7:54pm](#)

I will come back to Chiyo-ni's haiku:

"I forget my lips are rouged - at the clear water"....

Haiku - as far as I'm concerned - compels us to write that element of truth within us. Within each of us is a guiding essence that causes us to write in the first place. Some people find war and horror and the dark side of life a necessary subject - just shining light on it helps us to understand a little better. It takes centuries for mankind to evolve. By people like you bringing up these facts of history and shining a light on them add to the consciousness of mankind.

Poetry calls us to speak out truth...what are we given? Each of us has a different gift. Each of us has one more piece of the elephant.

I could no more go around writing poems of war than an ant could. An ant could probably do a better job. That is not what has been given to me to write about. It would be pretty silly of me to spend my life trying to write such poems just because I felt the importance of a poem like this one presented here.

These are priceless records of human lives and I am grateful that this site has been set up to preserve them and to bring them to light once again.

In gratitude,
Merrill

Paul MacNeil

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Submitted on [2009/08/12 at 1:33pm](#)

I do not believe haiku exists for polemicism. No room in the Inn. A participant, a witness to war, has every right to use what is at hand in haiku Art. Not for the armchair poet via CNN who just has a point. Shiki was there, Watanabe was as well. Old Basho's reply was haiku is what is happening right here, right now — immediately before him? From the Iraq war, perhaps the first Annapolis graduate to be killed was Kylan Jones-Huffman. I knew him and sat with him to write renku and gab re: haiku. A professional warrior, he like most sol-

diers hated war, but trained to practice it. He was also a historian and haiku poet. He E-mailed me one from Bahrain which we published in the Heron's Nest (Vol.V, #7, 2003):

gaunt children
selling old bayonets-
noonday sun

- Kyran Jones-Huffman

I think it a _quintessential_ war poem. His description of the sellers, and what they sell are spot on. And the haiku's vertical axis, the allusion in the last line? Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun (and others going to war not only from Britain in the Raj).

More of his brief life's haiku:

http://www.theheronsnest.com/haiku/0509z1259/thn_issue.m1.html

Bird haiku, Scott Metz, may have life and death and great seriousness, or beauty, or be fun, or Shashei (— a term that is not pejorative). Scott Mason has captured my thoughts nicely. [And, the totalitarian Taliban did actually blow up Buddhas. Marxists/Stalinists lock up or kill priests, close cathedrals, close monasteries—it is de rigeur, worldwide . . . Tibet, Cuba.]

- Paul MacNeil

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Submitted on [2009/08/12 at 1:47pm](#)

i am questioning the artistic quality of certain work, not their existence. and i wonder why we see more ku about baseball and birds (just two examples) than war, its effects and repercussions.

as i stated in a comment for the 3rd Sailing post (i guess i'll quote myself):
"i'm the last person on earth that would tell someone not to follow their passion or interest, or to specifically not write bird [or baseball] haiku. Go for it."

writing from interests and experiences is, of course, vital. the popularity of baseball and bird haiku though, i think, has an overall detrimental effect on how english haiku are viewed by poets and artists. for me, baseball ku=nostalgia, preciousness, escapism (ignoring any number of issues like corporate greed, taxpayer money used for stadiums, steroids, overpaid egomaniacs playing with a ball and stick). bird haiku usually=weather reports + a lesson on taxonomy. (another issues with these kinds of topics is that they all look and feel almost exactly the same, presenting a kind of conformity and laziness with little newness being brought to them). their popularity opens a

gateway for many to think that that's what english haiku is mostly about and what they should be thinking and writing about and submitting.

haiku can be found anywhere though, and artistic examples can always be found.

war ku can be just as bad. or just as good. i am for nothing except the legitimacy of *all* paths and *all* topics, not just a few narrow ones. why some topics more than others though? and are the majority of them truly artistic? are they really poems or something that should stay in diaries/notebooks/cards/letters?

perhaps it is insensitive of me, but i don't really care if something is popular or not. or if a lot of people like them. that's nice. i think that's precisely why they should be questioned, critiqued, and looked at critically (instead of being ra ra about them and having an "it's all good" attitude). sorry, but most ku on birds and baseball make me either yawn, roll my eyes, or leave me, overwhelmingly, thinking "so what?" (english senryu and their "masters" have exactly the same effect on me). i don't consider the majority of them artistic, let alone worthy of anthologizing. for me, they are definitely not moments of wonderment. i'm not saying they can't be though.

this is the kind of work that is seen most prominently by people outside the haiku peninsula. so i think it's important to question it. *not its existence*, but that they are so prominent and, through the anthologies (Norton is no small company), representative of eng haiku in the mainstream. they are, i think, more for birders and baseball fans than for poets or artists.

if someone submitted to me a wonderful, artistic baseball or bird ku i would grab it in a second and publish it. and i would certainly reject a poor/bad war ku that could make me yawn.

the question i'm interested in is: *why* isn't there more work relating to our relationship to war and its effects through nearly every aspect of society, our anxieties about the state of the world?—as westerners. certainly there are some. there are many other ways of writing haiku about war though without overtly stating it or using the actual word "war" (imaginatively, mythically, through allusion, symbolically—not necessarily through "direct experience"; tv *is* a reality for millions of people, especially americans and "direct experience" is only one way to write a haiku poem). does this have something to do with how privileged and "wealthy" (thank you China for the credit card) we are as a society, as well as being the aggressors 9 times out of 10 ("WHAT WE SAY GOES")? are baseball ku more of result of a "happy motoring" culture more obsessed with shopping, sports and media darlings than the effects our way of life has on others (which cause wars, environmental devastation and

death)? i'm not trying to sound like a commie pinko here but is baseball ku a kind of opium for the haiku poets? what are the effects?

makoto (genuiness) should be, and probably is, the basis for all art. but makoto alone is not enough or the only element in making something great or worthy of publication. art must employ more than that. and i think it's naive to think that the prominence of work like bird and baseball ku, artistic as they are capable of being, through popular anthologies will not have an effect on how english haiku is viewed by most people and will not effect what they write, or what they think eng haiku is about. because of this, these poems' makoto comes into question. are people writing from their hearts, based on genuine feeling, uniquely and artistically expressed, or do they simply want to get in print, and writing about birds and baseball (or cherry blossoms or bud-dha) will get them there quicker?

Allan Burns

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Submitted on [2009/08/12 at 5:58pm](#)

A few responses to specific passages from Scott's latest post:

"and i wonder why we see more ku about baseball and birds (just two examples) than war, its effects and repercussions"

You'd need first to prove that there are indeed more baseball and bird haiku than war haiku. Have you actually counted? Dimitar Anakiev has announced plans for an anthology of war haiku, so that is not a neglected subject. Click on [this link](#) (but note the deadline for submissions has passed).

Impressionistically, I'd say there must be more bird than war haiku in our journals & tradition, but I'm not at all sure about war haiku vs. baseball ku (a convenient term for haiku + senryu + hybrids)—and esp. not if we're speaking historically. Personally, I've written a lot of bird haiku, some war haiku (my work will appear in Dimitar's anthology), and no baseball haiku.

Birds are just about everywhere whereas war, thankfully, is not. So that's one reason. Also, haiku typically contain a nature reference—that's satisfied by birds but not by war or baseball.

"writing from interests and experiences is, of course, vital. the popularity of baseball and bird haiku though, i think, has an overall detrimental effect on how english haiku are viewed by poets and artists"

You're trying to have it both ways here, no? Write what you want! Oh, but what you're writing is "detrimental" in my view—please stop!

I'd like to know, first off, who these "poets and artists" you mention are. Can you provide quotations or other evidence to back up your claim, or are they just projections of your own imagination? And no matter who they are, why

should we care what they think, Scott? Do they care what any of us thinks about their work, in a way that would actually change what they're doing? Honestly, I should hope not.

You really seem to be starting out with the assumption that haiku poets are somehow inferior to other "poets and artists" and should kowtow to their views. That's not an assumption I share.

"for me, baseball ku=nostalgia, preciousness, escapism (ignoring any number of issues like corporate greed, taxpayer money used for stadiums, steroids, overpaid egomaniacs playing with a ball and stick). bird haiku usually=weather reports + a lesson on taxonomy. (another issues with these kinds of topics is that they all look and feel almost exactly the same, presenting a kind of conformity and laziness with little newness being brought to them)"

The main thing I'm hearing you say, here and earlier, is that you personally have no interest in and little knowledge about these two topics: baseball and birds.

Well, why should any of us care, Scott?

I mean, you admitted to thinking that a Paul Miller haiku mentioning "wintering harlequins" was an allusion to Nabokov!! Okay, not everyone is familiar with Harlequin Ducks (their loss); but the adjective "wintering" is a pretty big clue here as to what we're dealing with. What that says to me is that you need to get out more, Scott. Learn something about birds before you start attacking bird haiku and those who write them. (And there are, btw, really only a handful of haiku poets in English who are truly knowledgeable birders.)

Either that or just accept that the range of your experience, knowledge, and interests is limited in this respect. Obviously, you were not part of Paul Miller's ideal audience for that one—just as you aren't for many of mine. (And, yes, I have noticed that this tirade against bird haiku pretty much coincides with my sending you a copy of NR6, which, oh, just happens to contain a 2-pg spread of my own bird haiku. Btw, where's that copy of NR5, Scott?)

To turn the tables—What's so great and groundbreaking about one-liners and surreal imagery? Neither been done before, you imagine?

"why some topics more than others though?"

The two topics you're attacking go back to Basho and Shiki, respectively. Both offer a great deal of variety and thus possibilities for haiku treatment. And both have obviously engaged the interests of quite a few haiku poets. You don't share those interests? Well, then, write about what interests you and stop lecturing the rest of us....

"and are the majority of them truly artistic? are they really poems or something that should stay in diaries/notebooks/cards/letters?"

We each decide for ourselves, Scott. Other poets and other editors don't need your approval, thankfully. And do you imagine everyone likes all of your own work or all of what you publish in Roadrunner?

"sorry, but most ku on birds and baseball make me either yawn, roll my eyes, or leave me, overwhelmingly, thinking 'so what?'"

And my reaction to that is, "So what?" For reasons I've already spelled out.

Maybe your own time would be better served creating the kind of anthology you'd like to see rather than maligning the excellent work of others, no? I enjoyed Cor's baseball haiku anthology enormously, and I consider Wing Beats by John Barlow & Matthew Paul to be one of the finest haiku books English-language haiku can show, both in terms of content and production. I can't recommend it highly enough.

Frankly, Scott, I don't think what you're doing right now serves the best interests of this blog, THF, or haiku.

Scott Metz

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Submitted on [2009/08/12 at 7:00pm](#)

i'm really sorry you feel that way, allan.

again, i'm more concerned about quality than anything, and it's all so subjective. clearly, we don't agree on what's excellent. what works for us. that's quite normal. and expected.

so much for questioning the status quo.

sorry i haven't gotten that in the mail yet. i don't have any money.

Peter Yovu

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Submitted on [2009/08/12 at 8:28pm](#)

I want to lean on Paul Miller a moment here, and bring back his statement several posts ago.

"A lot of interesting questions are asked here, but to me the most interesting is 'If we want to stop the atrocities of war and their destructive repercussions, shouldn't we be writing about it then, instead of, say, birds and baseball?'"

****Which is another way of asking: what is the purpose of our poetry?****

(Italics mine).

I think that is wisely presented. We have our passions, for sure. And ultimately for the good. But passions come with a good deal of "stuff" as we Americans like to say, especially in expressing them. Any married couple is familiar with

how that works. I am grateful that Paul M was not overcome by the heat and so was able to get to the light.

Sandra Simpson

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Submitted on [2009/08/13 at 4:46am](#)

Might I humbly suggest that we write what we write. It's up to the reader to read what he/she likes. If that's not what we write, it may be disappointing, but ultimately we have no control. Every creative artist works in a field not only of subjective responses, but also fashion and whim . . . and haiku poets are not exempt.

If you don't like what is on the page, turn the page to another poem or close the book, but—and this is a big but—if you can recognize inherent quality and talent at least give it a nod. High production values don't necessarily make for good poems, but they do help!

Our inspiration is our own, formed by our experiences—upbringing, people we have known and all the tastes, scents, sounds and sights that we gather as we grow and age—and all we can do is draw from that and fashion it as best we can.

I will note here that baseball haiku do very little for me, although I will try them, as I haven't been brought up in a baseball tradition (like most of the world, you know!) and bird haiku work better if I know the bird – which means that most of the rest of the world is left bemused by my bird haiku because the native fauna here is unique. But that handicap to being published in the wider world doesn't stop me writing them, though.

If you believe in what you are writing it helps. If you can bring an aesthetic sensibility to your work, it helps . . . but as I said at the beginning . . . we write what we write.

John Stevenson

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Submitted on [2009/08/13 at 6:03am](#)

As a parent I often use our common interests in music as an opening to communication with my son. We talk about the music and many topics that it suggests.

One thing that I contribute to the discussion is the idea that the singer or musicians often exhibit great skills but somehow do not touch my personal concerns or my “frame of reference.” I emphasize that this is not a defect on their

part but that it's legitimate and only natural for me to have personal preferences. I'm hoping to hear music that is both skillful and somehow "mine."

The music itself is secondary, however, to the process of saying who I am and hearing my son say who he is. It seems to me that a will to do both things is necessary for communication to take place.

Merrill Ann Gonzales

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Submitted on [2009/08/13 at 5:41pm](#)

Hi, Guys, You know—for me—just to find the words to try to say what is in my "spirit" is such a daunting task . . . Once I get it out, and if it speaks to one other person, I don't really care if it's published, or if it saves the world, or if it saves poetry or if it saves haiku . . .

Who am I to save haiku? It will be what each of us is.

I am thankful that everyone here has the freedom to express what they honestly feel. You guys will never know how much it helps me try to find the words.

In gratitude, Merrill

Scott Metz

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Submitted on [2009/08/13 at 8:47pm](#)

"Poets of both the Shinkō (New Rising) haiku movement and 'Hototogisu' (the traditionalist school) took up war themes in their haiku (circa 1937). In the Shinkō haiku movement, Sanki Saitō and Seishi Yamaguchi suggested that even haiku poets not serving in the war should write war haiku, using their imagination, and mainly non-seasonal antiwar senka-sōbō haiku (Imaginary Battlefield Haiku) were composed by non-combatant poets" (Haiku Universe for the 21st Century).

Merrill Ann Gonzales

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Submitted on [2009/08/14 at 9:36pm](#)

Scott, Anything I might write about war would sound artificial. I have had my wars but they were not of the institutional national kind... We all have wars in our life that define us. Some of our wars are as brutal and as cruel as what you label war. We can only write about what we can write about with any kind of authority.

Why should I trivialize the experience of some young man who has had his legs blown off? I don't know the words . . .

Those people who are in that kind of war whether voluntarily or by induction are far more able to find the essential elements that could make a difference. If someone like me tries to do that, you'd have hundreds of would-be poets writing drivel.

I think it would be far greater help to have avenues for veterans to do this. How many haiku poets can visit veteran hospitals – giving some guy who doesn't know what hit him some means of finding a voice for what he'd been through. Wouldn't that be far more vital in bringing the truth home.

Scott Metz

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Submitted on [2009/08/14 at 10:14pm](#)

all great points, merrill.

i just thought it was a fascinating quote showing what Japanese poets have done and experimented with in the 20th c. and “artificiality” is certainly an important topic that could be applied to many areas of haiku composition and topics.

when it comes to writing about “war” though i don't think we should limit ourselves to actual battles or the point of view of soldiers, male or female (or robot/drone). Watanbe composed the ku in this Envoy not as a soldier but as a citizen who was against the war and who was writing haiku that were non-traditional. for that he was jailed and later sent to the front lines in China. his ku is from the pov of a citizen and how it affects him/them psychologically (which can be just as frightening).

i find myself trying to put myself in the shoes of the citizens the US military terrorizes and dictates over (how would we feel, for instance, if, say, the military of the Chinese gov't had decided that our gov't wasn't doing a good job and they were going take over the country and run it for a while?). the US, in many ways, has become the British Empire it once denounced and split away from. how do the two wars the US gov't is conducting affect everyone's lives? we have no \$ for education, infrastructure, health care, etc but we have enough to pay for two wars and more military use in other places too (Afri-com, south america and in europe and Georgia) as well as bailing out banks and car corporations. these kind of priorities affect the lives of ordinary citizens and they are caused by our “oil wars.”

so, i take a much wider view of war and how we relate to it and how its resonates, where it echoes: where do we find its effects in ordinary, everyday life? some feel and see it more than others; and perhaps many will not make or see

these things connecting to each other. certainly there are personal “wars,” and “imaginary battle field” ku certainly can be seen as artificial, especially if they are done poorly (but what if they are done well and artistically? why wouldn’t that be valid?).

like anything/any topic though, i think there’s potential there and perhaps worth contemplating. where does it take us and why wouldn’t our imagination be a valid place to write from? what happens when we treat the word “war” more as a keyword, as Watanabe has done? where do we find the arms and fingers and residues of war? even if it is a personal, miniscule war, it might lend itself to larger connotations and take on metaphorical, universal meaning. where are our bombs and bullets falling? they do, afterall, come from us and are the result of our way of life and lifestyles and represent us (the word “blowback” comes to mind). the wars might be invisible to us, but they are connected to so many things, it seems, to so much. perhaps “the invisible war” or “the invisible wars” would be an interesting phrase to use in haiku composition. i don’t know.

Paul Miller

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171.159.194.10

Submitted on [2009/08/17 at 8:31am](#)

Hi Scott,

I think you hit it on the head when you said “some feel and see it more than others.” For me, personally, the war is not much involved in my life. Those I know have served and returned intact. And are, in fact, supporters of the various wars. Likewise, while I think the bailouts of the car companies is money we’ll never see again, it really doesn’t affect my day to day life. If someone (like yourself, it sounds) were more bothered by these things than a haiku on the subject would be appropriate, and probably necessary. But the fact that we don’t have as many war haiku as bird haiku suggests to me that people aren’t as bothered by the war immediately.

Sandra Simpson

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Submitted on [2009/08/17 at 4:19pm](#)

Perhaps “we” (meaning people in the English-speaking world) don’t write as many war haiku simply because far fewer of us are affected by the current wars than, say, WW2.

During that war people were directly affected in every English-speaking nation – Britain where aerial bombardment took place and the others because men

had left to fight overseas and various “war effort” dictates were in place (rationing, food production, weapons production, etc).

There has been at least one book of haiku produced on the Korean War by a veteran and there have been haiku written about Vietnam (although I don’t know if any have been collected into a book).

I have written some war haiku based on what I have been told by people who were directly affected by, for instance, the Iran–Iraq war, the civil war in Lebanon, and in Bosnia. I haven’t written any based on what I see on television, although have attempted some after seeing an exhibition by the official artist with our troops in Afghanistan.

What I’m taking a long time to say is – direct experience is the key. Many English–speaking nations have troops in the current areas of conflict, but relatively speaking, that’s not many people. Our day–to–day lives, generally speaking, are not affected one jot by these wars. The arrival of the godwits or an unseasonal hailstorm are more likely to inspire a haiku than Iraq or Afghanistan.

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Submitted on [2009/08/17 at 5:06pm](#)

I guess being a widow perhaps I understand the loss . . . From what I can see the only way we, who have never been in the heat of war, can write about it is to write about how the war affects us. Are we affected when we see a maimed soldier wheeling around the grocery store? Are we affected when we are faced with the long term care of the wounded?

This post got me thinking about many things like this. Even if we are not directly involved, we are all connected by our very humanity.

But can haiku do anything to stop war? Perhaps that’s not the point.

Perhaps, instead of stifling the response to war we all feel . . . perhaps haiku can help us to find the words – to perhaps understand it a little better?

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Submitted on [2009/08/21 at 11:05am](#)

War stood at the end of the corridor

The subject of this envoy is of daunting importance I believe. I would say I have avoided it until now, and even now I come into its neighborhood with trepidation. There is something about shadowy material that wants to protect

its own turf, to keep observers out, hissing in dark corners at the intrepid with their candles, curiosity and determination.

There are elements in the human psyche that would do, and have done, and likely will continue to do, acts of astonishing cruelty upon others, and which turn upon the individual as well, if you consider how vicious one's "inner critic" can be. It wants, for reasons I can't say I fully understand, to keep us out of that neighborhood. But we have to go there, or it will come to us. The corridor, after all, starts with you and me, and it ends with us.

This is a view not all share. There are many who believe that such cruelty and violence originates outside of us. For all I know they're right, but I don't find the view workable. It seems to compound things.

In a review I did a couple of years ago, I quoted Robert Bly, who said: "American haiku poets don't grasp the idea that the shadow has to have risen up and invaded the haiku poem, otherwise it is not a haiku. The least important thing about it is its seventeen syllables or its nature scene." If this raised hackles in the community, I barely heard. Maybe I'm foolish to bring it up here, but surely it fits, surely it pertains to the poem we are considering, and to the question of what haiku may be, how it signifies, and what one may say about its "purpose".

Robert Hass, in his essay "Images", opens this a little differently. Speaking of Basho he says: "Capable of enormous clarity, of an extraordinary emotional range, there is at the center of his work... a sense of the sickness or incompleteness of existence". Perhaps I am only fitting it to my case, but I read this as referring to the unconscious and to the shadow realm. What Bly seems to be saying is that Basho and others worked with this sense of "sickness" or "anxiety" (a word Bly uses elsewhere about Basho), which may be the anxiety one feels approaching any dark neighborhood, including, especially, the one within. But he did enter. More than anything, one might argue, this is what gives him his authority, and why we delve into his work even today.

Iraq and Afghanistan stand at the end of a corridor so long, and with so many side hallways leading to the TV room, the movie theaters and the beach, as to be almost ignorable. I find myself making occasional forays beyond these distractions, then retreating to my comforts, including sometimes, this blog. But the shadow realm is a superconductor—the atoms of war and violence smash into one's heart at the speed of light—or, if you will, the speed of darkness. In fact, if you will allow the quantum analogy, they exist at both ends of the tunnel simultaneously.

I don't think Bly's statement is far removed from Scott Metz' question: "If we want to stop the atrocities of war and their destructive repercussions, shouldn't we be writing about it then, instead of, say, birds and baseball?" I

do not wish to resume the tensions that arose earlier here, but I do wish to respond to Scott's question.

I don't know what I **should** be writing about, but I know that if I stay in my comfort zone as a writer, it is usually because I have not wanted something challenging, or squirmy, or with teeth, to reveal itself. I probably do this most of the time. It comes partly from laziness, stopping too soon with my explorations, sometimes saying under the breath of my breath: someone will publish this, it's good enough.

I'm not saying my poems or yours should always have teeth or look like dragonfly larvae. But if in our writing there is a persistent ignoring of our larval natures and a preference for our angelic natures, we may be giving strength to forces which will emerge somewhere, grow wings, and maybe drop bombs.

Can poetry stop wars or violence or cruelty in the world? I don't know. I do believe however, that engaging with one's whole life in any art may be a means of discovery, of self-uncovering. The more we see about ourselves, the less we need to act out. I don't know that this needs to be a conscious purpose, and certainly not a program or agenda, but I do know that when I come across work in which it is evident that the author, or painter, or composer has faced him or herself, has allowed some shadow material to rise and has found the means of showing what was found, I am grateful. It has often been said, in different ways, that the role or purpose of the artist and spiritual seeker is to go into the depths, into hell if need be (and as many myths demonstrate), in order to reveal the living light upon their return. It is a paradox of great art that it may find beautiful expression for what is most repellent. The best art, the best haiku whatever the subject, shines the brightest when it has come through the dark.