



REVIRALS

Archival Feature

The Haiku Foundation

INTRODUCTION TO RE:VIRALS

In the early days of the The Haiku Foundation, our *Troutswirl* blog was overseen by Scott Metz, who curated many interesting programs, including an interactive poem-and-commentary feature called “Virals.” Today we’re bringing it back, with a twist.

Below you’ll find this week’s poem. We invite you to write a commentary to it. It may be as long or short, academic or spontaneous, serious or silly, public or personal as you like. We will select out-takes from the best of these. And the very best will be reproduced in its entirety and take its place as part of the THF Archives. Best of all, the winning commentator gets to choose the next poem for commentary.

Anyone can participate. A new poem will appear each Friday morning. Simply put your commentary in the Contact box by the following Tuesday midnight (Eastern US Time Zone). Please use the subject header “re:Virals” so we know what we’re looking at. We look forward to seeing some of your favorite poems — and finding out why!

RE:VIRALS 1

greener than autumn light
on wind-bent reeds
the teal's wing

— Martin Lucas (*Earthjazz*, Ram Publications, 2003)

June Dowis felt fully engaged by the poem, commenting “This haiku instantly puts me alone pond side, or at least in silence with someone else pond side. This strikes me as a deep in thought moment, where you are trying to figure out yourself, the world, and all of the sudden you focus on beauty that is right in front of you; and then, for the moment, it doesn’t matter if you resolve your thoughts.” Paul Geiger felt the poem could use some sharpening, and suggested “I think greener clashes as a comparative to autumn light (yellowish). I’d like ‘bright green in autumn light’ for line 1.” But our most incisive commentary was received from Allan Burns, who indicates this is one of his very favorite Martin Lucas haiku:

Perhaps what first grabs our attention here is the unusual syntactical structure, beginning with a comparative adjective. This is quite different from the familiar adjective-plus-noun haiku opening move (“winter moon,” etc.). And it suspends meaning in a way that motivates us to read on.

The first image, “autumn light/ on wind-bent reeds,” is very much of the painterly “now,” although “wind-bent” potentially introduces a significant minor-key aspect of change and transience. In conjunction with the explicit seasonality, it situates “the moment” in a broader network of time and forces.

Without a cut (or with just a very slight one at the end of line two), the last line reveals the more intense element of the comparison: It’s the teal’s wing, or specifically the iridescent patch on it, that’s “greener.” So we have here the expected juxtaposition of images but in an unusual form: comparative, inverted, and climactic. The format on the page narrows to the dominant image.

In North America, we know this species of duck (*Anas crecca*) as the green-winged teal; in the U.K., from which our poet hailed, it's known simply — as named here — as the teal, or common teal. (Subspecies on either side of the Atlantic are field-identifiable: The European variety, for instance, lacks the vertical white line on the side of the breast but has a bold white wing bar.) The smallest duck in those ranges, barely half the size of a mallard, teal are common dabblers on lakes and ponds or along rivers and seashores. The male's plumage is less remarkable overall in autumn, but the green wing patch, or speculum, remains brilliant year round.

The emphasis on that patch might well lead us to imagine the teal is in flight, for that's when it's most obviously displayed. If so, the haiku is more dynamic than it might initially appear. Then again, the bird may simply have stretched a wing. . . .

Ultimately, this is a poem of evocation, requiring reader participation in the scene and the feeling it elicits, with more to experience than to explain. It provides that tingle in the spine of “being there” that is one of the most characteristic and highly prized aesthetic attributes of this brief, immediate genre. At the same time, the careful composition, which is not merely a transparent window, provides its own pleasures of sound (dominated by the “long e” vowel and nasal consonants), rhythm, and, as noted, unusual syntactical structure. It's this spontaneous-seeming and successful combination of content and form that makes this an outstanding haiku.

As this week's winner, Allan gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 2

forest skull's
sockets hold
my eyes

— John Martone (*forest skull, dogwood & honeysuckle* 2007)

Peter Newton, in his excellent explication of the poem, offers the following:

One tell-tale sign of haiku is the poet's connection to nature. In Martone's poem "forest skull's" that connection is made on a visceral level. An awareness upon seeing the decayed skull of an animal — that humans too have sockets. Sockets — a shocking word really when it comes to describing the human body. Shocking as the sight of the animal skull. Sockets — the pivotal word — those compartments that hold our eyes and hold the blank space where the animal's eyes were. A haunting image. A stark truth. The same eyes used to witness this realization. There's a tone of sadness here. The touch word "hold" which of course is a strange way to describe how eyes exist in the human body, as held by sockets. The poet is reminding us here that we too are an assemblage of body parts. Prone to coming apart. The body as ephemera. Bits of bone and blank space. And yet we are also capable of compassion. And self-awareness. A defining human trait that Martone emphasizes in six words. Brevity at its best.

Our winner this week, however, is Jason Charnesky, who offers this paean to this seminal poem:

Simple.

Six words.

A web of image, sound, and sense that takes us from the unexamined commonplace face to face with the wordless real.

The naïve treesy image of that first word, "forest," is undercut by "skull's" as the poem reminds us that a forest is not simply some arboreal expanse of vegetation. It is a network, a web of living-dying things, each as much a part

of the forest as the trees themselves.

So in this forest, and a part of it, a skull. This is not beaver skull or mouse skull anymore. It is forest skull. The animal's death has returned its parts back to the forest.

The possessive ending of "skull's" propels us to the second line's "sockets." We focus on an absence. The holes where the eyes were once. These empty cavities draw our attention as the poem finds its first complete phrase: forest skull's sockets.

What a difficult phrase! The clusters of unvoiced /s/ and /t/ and /s/ and /k/ force us to deliberately enunciate that first line and to take particular care to mark the end of the first word and the start of the second. These clusters of unvoiced consonants are gathered together in the word "sockets" in an almost perfect chiasmus. These sounds are brought together, and our attention is brought into focus, in sockets.

Yet how difficult, on first hearing, to understand the grammar of this sentence. Does the forest skull? Do the forest skulls socket? No, there is an s – so socket isn't the verb either. The first three words cast us into confusion until finally "hold" takes hold and puts the sentence in order. We understand. The sockets hold. And the sockets belong to a single skull in the forest.

But what can these emptinesses, these sockets, hold?

Caught in this koan-like puzzle we pass to the last line. "my eyes" The speaker, the hiker, the one who has come upon this skull is caught in a weirdly unreciprocated gaze — living eyes upon empty eye sockets.

The possessive first person pronoun inserts the human and positions it as point of view and focus of perception and action: "I" My ego. "my eye" And how insistently this phrase is held onto. "my eyes" begins with the voiced consonant and moves as a single triphthonged syllable or melisma through the semivowel and glide to the final s. A single move. "my" attached to those "eyes," holding them in possession. So different from the unvoiced separation of forest skull.

Held in this gaze, the speaker is brought to a moment where it is possible to realize that those skull sockets hold the truth and future state of the living eyes. To this they, too, shall come. The forest skull sockets do, indeed, hold the eyes, as a place holder of their ultimate state.

We are reminded of the admonition in the Satipa hāna Sutta: ‘when a bhikkhu sees a body discarded in the charnel ground, reduced to loose bones scattered in all directions — here bones of the hand, there bones of the foot, shin bones, thigh bones, pelvis, spine and skull — he then applies [this perception] to his own body, “Truly, this body too is of the same nature. It will become like that and will not go beyond that nature.”’

What nature is there to go beyond? The forest and the forest skull. The sockets and my eyes. The web of living-dying forms. This moment of wordless realization is held in the sockets of the skull. No wonder Allan Burns has called this poem “the great memento mori of our haiku literature.”

As this week’s winner, Jason gets to choose next week’s poem.

RE=VIRALS 3

where the battlefield
narrows to a cattle path:
the dew on the grass

— Nick Virgilio (*Selected Haiku*, Black Moss Press 1988)

In this instance we have a commentary from the author himself, “A Journey to a Haiku,” reproduced in *Nick Virgilio: A Life in Haiku* from Turtle Light Press (2013).

A Journey To A Haiku, By Nicholas A. Virgilio

In a corner of an old graveyard in Camden, N.J., there is a small lot of bare, hard ground trampled by trespassers. One day while passing by on a bus, I was impressed with this lot which triggered a poetic experience that, in turn, started trains of thought concerning the destined anonymity of most human beings. One of the early attempts to express the experience was:

the grassy graveyard . . .
not a blade where children played,
near the battleground

This graveyard is not really “grassy.” And “near the battleground” is a construct of the imagination. Some months later, I imagined a poem with a plantation setting:

the plantation ruins:
a bulldozer levels
the slave quarters

Somehow, a short time thereafter, the Camden graveyard experience began to fuse with efforts to compose the “plantation” haiku. After several versions, I composed:

near the battleground
where children play in the grass:
the graveyard of slaves

Then the 'poem,' with one foot in Camden, N.J., and the other on a southern plantation, planted both feet south of the Mason-Dixon line:

near the battleground,
where cattle graze in the grass:
the grave mounds of slaves

After a few attempts to strengthen the weak second line with either "where cattle graze in bluegrass," "where cattle graze in waving grass," "where cattle graze in flowering grass," or "where cattle graze in crab grass," I decided it was impossible to really strengthen this line. I tried rearranging the lines. As the poem evolved, I sensed that "battleground" and "grave mounds" should be near each other. This occurred after the change from "the graveyard of slaves" to "the grave mounds of slaves." "Battleground" and "grave mounds" is the major relationship; "cattle" and "slaves" is of secondary importance.

This, I think, is the best version; the "picture" and the poem are improved:

where cattle graze
near the grassy battleground:
the grave mounds of slaves

The second and third lines suggest what is truly important:

near the grassy battleground:
the grave mounds of slaves

"where cattle graze" justifies itself when the reader compares "cattle" to "slaves;" this line also introduces the peaceful mood of the poem.

Now consider the version that begins with “near the battleground” This line is vague, since it really doesn’t put the reader in a particular place. And it could mislead the reader into thinking the war is still going on. “where cattle graze in the grass” is trite, compounded by the unnecessary “in the grass.”

This second line acts as a barrier over which the reader must leap in order to connect “grave mounds” with “battleground.” In this version, the third line “the grave mounds of slaves” practically carries the entire load, and makes the poem. Of course, any poem should not depend for its very life on one line; the reader may lose interest before he gets to it.

Let us reexamine what I consider the best version:

where cattle graze
near the grassy battleground:
the grave mounds of slaves

We began with a real graveyard experience in Camden, N.J., and transformed it into an imagined American historical “picture” haiku with a setting somewhere in the South. Thus, the journey takes us from a small lot of bare, hard ground to “the grave mounds of slaves,” and destined anonymity.

But of course neither are poets automatically the best judges and interpreters of their own work (and some are notoriously poor), nor are we compelled to take a poet’s word in such instances as anything like final. Ultimately we must trust the words on the page, rather than any sort of agenda that might be offered in addition to these words. Raffael de Gruttola offers his insight into the poem:

Virglio’s haiku summons a brief moment of retrospect and reflection in as much as the calamity of war and destruction is so real in contemporary life today. Weather we focus on violence in its many forms or succumb to the many instances of violence on television, the streets of our cities, or the battlefields of the world today.

Here the juxtaposition of cattle paths and the dew on the grass speaks also to the common place in the history of wars on our planet from time immemorial. The prophecy here is that unless we find another planet to live on we may be the recipients of continual cataclysmic episodes which have been man-made.

Our winner this week is Dan Schwerin, who writes:

The best haiku layer and resonate like this one from St. Nick. The colon in this classic throws our attention forward to the dewy now. We who walk North American soil connect leaves of grass with the battlefield and hear the elegiac Whitman. Among humankind war is a season. This poem gently laments how we “narrow to a cattle path.” Three images move in and co-habit this small poem with plenty of room because we are kept moving from one image to the next, drawn to the honest minute particulars — the only way to view the battlefield.

Thank you, Jason, for taking us to see an old friend who told us the truth.

As this week’s winner, Dan gets to choose next week’s poem.

RE:VIRALS 4

birdsong editing my dream diary
— Julie Warther (*Hedgerow* 47)

Scott Mason is this week's winner, finding hidden resources in both form and content:

A haiku in one line presents the adept poet with a special option: to conflate two subjects or images with a degree of persuasiveness, even truth, that cannot be achieved through more conventionally formatted haiku with line breaks. Julie Warther performs such magic with this gem. Here we have the real (“birdsong”) and the imagined (“my dream diary”) literally in concert, giving new force and meaning to the old nursery rhyme lyric “Life is but a dream.”

As this week's winner, Scott gets to choose next week's poem.

RE-VIRALS 5

here other
than wind's lamentation
nothing is

— Clare McCotter (*Nest Feathers: Selected Haiku from the First 15 Years of The Heron's Nest*, The Heron's Nest Press 2015)

Marion Clarke is this week's winner. She writes:

As soon as I read this haiku it conjured up a windswept heath, much like a scene from Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* or a Thomas Hardy novel. Although no time of day is stated, the "lamentation of the wind" created an image of a cold, grey afternoon and I could imagine a woman standing in this desolate location, her hair whipping her face, as she mourns her departed lover.

When I realised this was written by Clare McCotter who is also from Northern Ireland, I was immediately transported from the land to the sea. This is a small island, so we are never very far from water and I'd like to think that it was written somewhere here on the north coast, perhaps not far from Clare's native Derry.

The syntax is highly interesting and it felt like I was reading it backwards. When I got to "nothing is", I was instantly drawn back to line 1 and read "here other" so the haiku begins all over again — never ending, just like the person's loneliness. Very clever!

As this week's winner, Marion gets to choose next week's poem.

RE=VIRALS 6

it's all
I ever wanted . . .
fireflies

— H. Gene Murtha (*The Heron's Nest* XIV:4)

Beth McFarland found the elegiac qualities of the poem compelling, and offered this dithyramb:

Some of us (the younger ones?) want it all. We want the fire! The more we want it, the more elusive it gets. What we try to grasp and capture isn't always destined for us after all. If we do catch hold of something, the magic may be gone instantaneously.

At some point we realize that what's out there for us is something bigger, way beyond our analyzing comprehension. The wonder of events we cannot control in their beauty. While it lasts, enjoy the elusive spectacle!

And Maureen Virchau personally echoes this quasi-mystical feeling:

It's one of those perfect summer nights. The kind I'd like to bottle. Lightning bugs dart across the backyard, sprinkling the darkness with glitter. It's nature in all its magical glory, and I don't know how I manage not to burst with feelings of amazement. Stripped of the day's burdens, I am reminded of myself as a child, chasing fireflies with a mason jar. Someday soon these particular insects will perish. Someday I will return to the soil as well. Life is temporary. Happiness is fleeting. Gratitude is forever.

But not everyone felt this was an unqualified success. Bertrand Agostini comments:

Although I am rather fond of the firefly image, this haiku has a somewhat ecstatic approach which I find too distant from the wabi-sabi philosophy of austerity and modesty (the use of the first person singular in the poem). True, the poem is economic and simple enough. Yet again, the poet's personal

desire is strong here. Perhaps I am too traditional, but I think a haiku should be devoid of egocentrism.

And Paul MacNeil found an echo of the poet's life evident in the poem:

Gene died so recently. I knew him only via e-mail correspondence over the years, yet I “knew” him. This haiku represents a yearning for the peace that eluded Gene personally. He was not too unlike the 8th Century Chinese poet Li Po (Li Bai) whose death is apocryphally attributed to his trying to embrace the moon in its watery reflection.

The relaxed, slow beauty of firefly randomness is neither here nor there. Murtha was a naturalist and a wonderful observer and poet with such a troubled life. He reached out to fireflies perhaps to touch, to hold on to — and yet?

Peter Newton's close analysis takes this week's award. He writes:

One of the biggest challenges for any haiku poet these days is to tackle a familiar subject and make it new. Fireflies, for example, are an often written-about insect. To write about fireflies is to step through a veritable minefield of “spring breezes” and “autumn leaves.” That's the level of difficulty I'm talking about when attempting to create a truly fresh and universal haiku with “fireflies.”

But Murtha, in his six-word poem gets right to work with the first word: “it's.” Is it “it is” or “it was?” A nuance that invites a moment's pause. And a contraction. Much like the bug itself. Though we do not know this yet. We begin the poem “in the dark” so to speak. “it's all”

What's all? we are invited to ask. Sounds like something important.

“I ever wanted” the poet answers as if we were strolling along side-by-side, reader and writer. But it could just as easily be an interior monologue. The self answers the self. In the middle of the poem we are in the midst of a familiar sentiment. The act of reminiscing. A throwback to childhood or some other youthful period in one's life. A simple spontaneous realization, which could also function as an alternate definition of “firefly.”

And out of nowhere — in line three: “fireflies” appear ending the drama of the opening lines. Ah, mother nature, she snaps us out of it doesn’t she. Gets us out of our heads. With lightning speed line three rescues us from the ennui that often accompanies mulling over one’s past. What a welcome relief these little guys are. Fireflies. I didn’t know myself how much they can ease a life’s worries. How they can erase the past with the very instantaneousness of their own existence.

The first part of the poem comes across as a question the reader must ask himself: what have I always ever wanted? The obvious answers are love, happiness. Or, to be loved, to be happy. But Murtha’s answer might be construed as a combination of both. Fireflies exist to mate. To perpetuate life. Seeing them ignites in us an age-old desire to be alive. Isn’t that all any of us has ever wanted?

As this week’s winner, Peter gets to choose next week’s poem.

RE=VIRALS 7

nothing
I didn't know
before
maple
after
maple

— Melissa Allen (*Notes from the Gean 3:2, 2011*)

Marion Clarke found many resources in this interesting vertical poem. She writes:

Melissa Allen's beautiful poem builds from the abstract to the concrete, line by line, inviting the reader to question the statements presented. Literally beginning with 'nothing' conjures up a bleak place. A wintry scene is imagined, like a total whiteout or perhaps even death. 'I didn't know' incites the reader to ask, "What didn't you know? Surely you didn't know nothing? And isn't that a double negative? And before what? Ah, before the maple!" And the reader is presented with these trees, one after the other and suddenly the blank, wintry space is filled with a riot of red and orange. Reading this aloud it felt like I should keep on saying, "maple after maple after maple . . ." Speed is also implied, so I pictured the narrator either driving along a road lined with these trees or jogging through a forest, surrounded by color. Finally, the first three lines made me think of the biblical phrase, 'There is nothing new under the sun,' underlining the cyclical nature of the seasons.

As this week's winner, Marion gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 8

granny's cushion —
pulling the darkness out
pin by pin

— Stella Pierides (*In the Garden of Absence*, Fruit Dove Press,
2012)

There is darkness indeed in this poem, but not necessarily easily accessed, and also the easing of darkness. Gary Eaton met it in this way:

This poem seems to me to evoke a child's response to the idea of black magic in the world. If evil can be done or pain caused by pushing pins into dolls made to represent enemies/victims, then, according to a child's logic, it can be undone by pulling them out. The fact that it's Granny's pillow with pins in it seems to me to imply that Granny is suffering and the child is doing her best to alleviate that pain somehow.

For Beth McFarland, it was much more of a home truth, full of the intimate details of her own childhood:

Granny, for us, was a silent, weak person in a wheelchair, with wispy, slightly wild hair that all the twins inherited. We knew nothing about her life or what kind of person she was. We only see her gestures and expressions in every new generation. My keepsake of hers is a shiny pink vase, cheap judging by the weight of it, but probably the thing I'd rescue if the house was on fire.

A pin cushion is a perfect keepsake — small, homely and personal, reminding us of homemaking skills and loving creations. Pins? Well, we know who we'd like to stick them into an image of!

Why are we the people we are? We attribute a lot of it to our families, the way they brought us up, the childhood memories they gave us, and of course the genes they gave us in passing. Our families gave us a grounding we've been working with ever since. They also kept out the hugeness of what we couldn't grasp — the darkness beyond. We blame them too — why did they have to

pass on those secret inhibitions and weaknesses? Could they not have given us a better pattern to follow?

But now we're in charge and we can start to be creative with the pins and the darkness, unravelling, patching, weaving — creating our own tapestry.

I love the innocent start to this haiku, revealing its darkness with as many questions and answers as we want to people it with!

As this week's winner, Beth gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 9

as soon as
the last pear falls —
another one

— Djurdja Vukelic Rozic (*Silent Music*, 2015)

Jim Kacian took up the challenge of this seeming counterfactual poem. He writes:

The merit of this poem would seem to hinge on the interpretation of the single word “last.”

It is possible that this poem’s interest lies within a simple misjudgement of translation. Perhaps the poet’s “last” means “previous” — in which case this poem is no more than an example of shasei in the broadest definition, reportage of an actual event in a straightforward manner. Though it might be noticeable that one pear’s landing is followed hard on by another, it is hardly notable. However, I believe there is more to recommend it than this. A second way to approach this poem is by way of yugen, a Japanese term that includes, among its various translations, mystery. To be literal: if the last pear has fallen, but there is something that compels us to think there is another that follows — the sound of its landing, say — then we are in a different reality. Are we noting an echo? Is something else landing that simulates the sound? The poem doesn’t supply the answer, it only offers the mystery.

This, by itself, would simply make for an unsatisfactory poem. However, we need not read it so literally: we might see this as a commentary on the endless vegetative cycle, that no sooner than one year’s fruit has dropped than the gathering of resources, to bloom to flowers and culminate in pears that drop, commences. The reading of “last” in this case would be “final.” Seen this way, the small mystery of the sound of fruit falling actually invokes the larger mystery of the seasons.

After comments for this poem had closed, Tzetzka Ilieva wrote to add the following:

There is a big pear tree in front of my grandparents' house. The branches spread above the porch, and when the pears are ready, each one of them falls with a bang on the roof of the porch.

This haiku reminded me of the many windy nights I've stayed there as a child, wide awake and hoping that each fruit is indeed the last one. Sometimes we shared a room with my mom and my little brother, and I remember my mom assuring us, "That's the last one!" And then again, and again.

There is another thing, in Bulgaria, the corresponding saying of "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree" is actually "the pear doesn't fall far from the tree," which adds an additional layer to the meaning (for me).

Thanks to Tzetzka for sharing her personal response to this interesting poem.

As this week's winner, Jim gets to choose next week's poem.

REVIRALS 10

Arrival
& the
Place
Is gone

— Amiri Baraka (*Un Poco Low Coup*, Ishmael Reed
Publishing Company, 2004)

We had many responses to this week's poem, suggesting either that readers found resonance with it, or that it challenged them. Marion Clarke was of the latter school of thought:

This poem struck me as quite an angry piece, perhaps because of those randomly placed uppercase letters and the use of an ampersand, as though the author couldn't be bothered writing out the word in full — like a literary act of defiance.

I think the author is making a comment about colonization, that as soon as we arrive in an unspoiled land, it signals the beginning of the end for that place. We don't have many elements to work with here, but "& the" is suggesting that the disappearance of the place is a consequence of the arrival of someone or something. An interesting poem.

Baraka's poem sparked quite different feelings in Ellen Olinger:

When I read this excellent poem I thought of Basho's haiku:

Even in Kyoto —
hearing the cuckoo's cry —
I long for Kyoto.

I first read Basho's poem some time ago, in *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, & Issa* (1994, Ecco Press). So I located the book on a shelf, and found that I wrote "Ecclesiastes 3: 11" next to Basho's haiku. Here is that

verse, in the King James Version:

“He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.”

Actually, though, Baraka’s poem is part of a haiga, to which Betty Shropshire chose to respond creatively, resulting in a wholly new ekphrastic product:

move! into freeze frame his bullet points

The week’s winning response, however, comes from Garry Eaton, who writes:

Pilgrimage to an old shrine that has vanished? Disappointment over the shifting goals and wasteful fashions of our treadmill lives? Though the poem uses a metaphor hardwired into our imaginations, travel and the open road as spiritual questing, it does so in a way that undercuts the metaphor as a universal. Tantalizingly, the goal being reached in the poem is not described as anything but “Arrival,” a deliberate vagueness that could, but doesn’t, necessarily, suggest airport arrivals lounges, with all their aura of suspended, dehumanized anonymity. Read thus, the poem seems to be talking about the loss of paradisaical wilderness and its opportunities for redemption (“the Place”) under the pressures of progress and increasing populations bent on human and economic development. Its effectiveness as haiku lies in the number of legitimate questions raised by the experience of reading it, rather than in any it answers.

As this week’s winner, Garry gets to choose next week’s poem.

REVIRALS 11

wind and rain
the hand I reach for
in the dark

— Peggy Willis Lyles (*Frogpond XVIII:3*, 1995)

Many people were moved to comment on this haiku. Marion Clarke was to the point:

I found this haiku sad, unsettling but comforting. Quite a feat in just three lines, really.

Ellen Olinger offered this heartfelt recollection that the poem stirred in her:

There are many ways to read this beautiful poem by Peggy Willis Lyles. This is part of the poem's craft and beauty. When I was young, my mother and I held hands. When she was very old and ill, and then dying, we held hands again. We had a saying, when I was a child, that we said with our hands, not aloud. It was about unconditional love. When she could not speak, this response was still available. After my mother's passing, I held the Bible I had read to her. This book now is held together with tape, in the Psalms section. I handle with care. It has been in many places and I sometimes hold it again in wonder. And read again, here and there.

Paul MacNeil found a biographical thread to the poem:

When a beautiful college woman married a handsome young man, his dress uniform from The Citadel Military College, this haiku was obvious from the photographs. Here was a lady with an officer and a gentleman. Peggy Willis and Bill Lyles were in love. Many years later, on the day she died, they were still in love.

Peggy, a master of haiku in English, made a "love match." Her haiku is about that love.

And Oonah Joslin found these redemptive features on display:

A cold beginning that makes us feel exposed, turns in the second line in such a way that the comfort sought engenders familiarity with the elements. The wind and rain that might threaten, actually make us feel more comfortable like lying in bed on a stormy night — listening. Somehow they make the darkness of the last line become a place of nurture — a womb, not a threat. And the hand we reach for, be it parent, sibling or partner, is familiar, too, and certain.

It is a poem of belonging. It encompasses our truth: that we each live in our own little pond of safety where we feel we can weather all life's storms.

As this week's winner, Oonah gets to choose next week's poem.

REsVIRALS 12

lough sunlight
this desire to walk
on water

— Marion Clarke, Under the Basho, Carousel Summer Haiku
Competition (First Prize, 2014)

This retelling of the miracle story in personal and poetic terms prompted Ellen Olinger to write:

Congratulations to Marion for her lovely poem. I remembered a Bible story: “And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea” (from the account in Matthew 14: 22-33 KJV). A favorite book by Madeleine L'Engle is *Walking On Water* (1980, Harold Shaw; Wheaton, IL). So while Marion's poem is specific to place, it then moves to a reference that will carry personal meanings for many.

As this week's winner, Ellen gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 13

pain fading the days back to wilderness

— Jim Kacian (*Roadrunner* VII:3, 2007)

This challenging poem offers many avenues of approach, but defies certainty of interpretation, making it a useful exemplum for analysis.

Marion Clarke took “pain” to be its center:

The words in this monoku seem to blend into each other, making the moment difficult to pin down. This is effective in reflecting how, during an illness, the days also blend into each other, especially when strong painkillers have been prescribed. The pain may be fading because of this medication but, as a result, the narrator feels at a distance from the rest of the world.

And Oonah Joslin follows that line:

Maybe it's the bewildering nature of wilderness that makes this so good. 'Pain fading' could mean that that pain is no longer sharp and so the days pass more easily but 'pain fading the days' would mean that pain becomes the norm and blanks out the whole of life in one bewildering question — why? In the wilderness all is ubiquitous. It's easy to lose oneself. It's easy to give up. And we have all been there either physically or mentally. One line of universal feeling. The human condition.

But Tzetzka Ilieva focused on release from pain as its primary characteristic, and for this relief is this week's winner:

I like the liberating feeling that comes with the word “wilderness”. We start with pain but we end up free of it. It doesn't matter if the pain is fading, or if it makes the days to be fading, because even if it were the latter, then when all the days disappear, the pain would be gone too. A gorgeous haiku with many possible readings.

As this week's winner, Tzetzka gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 14

virgin snow
a fox makes prints
for the morning

— Alan Summers (*Icebox*, Hailstone Haiku Circle, 2010)

Our commentators took several angles on this beautiful winter poem. Marion Clarke focused on a technical nicety by the poet:

The word ‘for’ is what makes this ku special, as it is so unexpected. It is easy to imagine the red fox against the white landscape leaving little tracks, but seeing these footprints as a present for the new day is such a lovely observation.

Mary Weiler found its incipient humor and a bit of whimsy:

I see Alan showing total respect and admiration for this crafty creature — very Issa-ish! I’m guessing it is a red fox, displaying its ultimate resourcefulness, intelligence and cunning. There is a hunt in the morning, so that night he begins making a complex puzzle of prints in the new snow to confuse and befuddle the silly hounds. He will watch the fiasco from his den, chuckling to his smart and beautiful self. I laughed out loud with this poem!
Or, perhaps Reynard isn’t a country fox at all but a civilized suburban fellow surviving well in a community. He possibly detected a footpath dangerous to moms and small children, too close to traffic. So, under cover of night, with the help of new snow, tracked a safe detour which was willingly followed by pedestrians the next morning. Clever boy!

And Oonah Joslin responded to the visual immediacy of the images:

Who doesn’t want to leave footprints in fresh snowfall? But of course the fox beats us to it every time and in this haiku one feels stillness all around and that the morning sun will be the first the see those prints left by a red fox on

white snow in the dark. It's pure magic!

But Jan Benson takes an entirely different tack, teasing a metaphoric reading from it, and even wondering if it might evoke the mythic:

I was puzzled on the first read of this haiku.

Upon the second reading, it became clear that the new fallen snow dropped during the night, since the fox was leaving a message (prints) to be deciphered in the morning.

But perhaps this haiku is alluding to our human nature to put first footprints into new snow; to be known for our imprinting upon earth and satisfying our need to have made a recognizable mark.

I think the stronger metaphor is of the wedding night, and the ancient ritual of proving the virginity of the bride prior to marriage-bed coitus. The proof of virginity (and consummation of the marriage), is revealed in the traces (prints) of blood on the bedsheets, shown to the family elders the morning after.

As this week's winner, Jan gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 15

impending buds
yellow with caution
we cross the border

— Scott Wiggerman (*Chrysanthemum* 17, 2015)

Two moving responses to this moving poem, the first, by Alan Summers, parsing the technical means the poet has used to bring us to this point:

Haiku demands precision because any loose words weaken the container holding water, and starts to leak. Here Scott Wiggerman allows no chance of water leaking out, and uses a number of power words that enhance the reading of this haiku.

Those power words: ‘impending’; ‘caution’; ‘cross’; and ‘border’ bring a tension that few of us may ever experience. But for those who cross the border, both literally, be it physically, emotionally, or changing for the better, or metaphorically in other ways, we are indeed latent flowers, impending buds that may flourish, or die away.

A great leading and opening line followed by a crime scene of a middle line: In haiku every line counts, and only so far as there are no superfluous words weakening the container. Haiku is not all about the last line, in itself, but how the earlier lines build up and support what otherwise could be a weak last line. And are last lines really that but an invitation to come back to the beginning of the poem?

Haiku done well are more than three-line poems, and each first, second, and third line makes the poem cyclical, just as nature itself is. Here we have a poem that might be five lines if we re-read the first two lines again, after crossing the border. Perhaps, sometimes, we are our own borders that we have to cross, to grow as humans, and so we are impending buds yellow with caution, but the bravest of us get across and move on, and evolve.

This is such a quietly powerful haiku that continues to explode and expand in my mind using all the potent devices that this short very specific genre has to offer.

The second, from Matthew Moffett, limits itself to the visceral:

The buds are yellow in color, but also because they're afraid. This is understandable, given that in the world outside everything eats everything else just to survive. The third line gives us the surprise, where what we thought was just about "nature" is now about humanity as well. Now we see that it's the human speaker and his/her compatriots who are "yellow with caution" as they "cross the border," presumably into another country. Of course, that's also betraying my bias toward humanity, given that the buds could just as well be announcing their crossing into the outside world. Then, too, I go back to that first line and read it as the children in a family of immigrants, terrified, trembling as their parents herd them into another country, where, given current events, the natives don't want them, even as they have nowhere else to go (just like the buds, who can't very well unblossom themselves). Powerful, powerful poem.

As this week's winner, Matthew gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 16

leaves blowing into a sentence

— Robert Boldman (*Cicada* 4.4, 1980)

This famous monoku was apparently too daunting for many to attempt an exegesis. Only Marion Clarke was willing to give it a go, imagining the moment of the poem's creation:

This haiku highlights nature as a source of inspiration. I could see a writer staring through the window above his desk. His pen is poised, but he is not writing. Suddenly, a gust of wind scatters a pile of autumn leaves and blows them across the yard. His gaze carries the image of the leaves in through the window and onto the blank page in front of him . . . and he begins to write!

As this week's winner, Marion gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 17

story hour
we fall further down
the rabbit hole

— John McManus (*bottle rockets* 28, 2013)

John's rabbit hole of a poem drew many down. Rebecca Drouilhet felt it to be a continuation of the same magic as its source:

The magic of storytelling comes alive in John McManus's haiku. I find myself lost in the story of Alice in Wonderland or any number of other stories that draw me in and whet my appetite for more.

Kathe L. Palka takes this concept a bit further:

“story hour” by John McManus is a poem of rich and multiple possible meanings. Is there some intrigue afoot full of lies and deceit in the form of a story told which furthers the deception and confusion of those involved? Or is the meaning more pleurably engaging. The pleasure of getting completely lost in a good story. A father reading to his children when all are both immersed in the perfect intimacy of the family moment and in the world of the story. McManus's poem recalls the pleasure of total immersion for both the storyteller and those listening to a captivating story — how all become one with the tale and with the telling. In this case all tumbling down the rabbit hole with Lewis Carroll in *Alice in Wonderland*. Down the rabbit hole and into the adventure.

Shrikanth Krishnamurthy placed it within his own childhood and adult experiences:

This haiku nicely captures the innocent fun of childhood. Line 1, as the fragment, introduces story time. The phrase that follows expands on it and alludes to the mysterious and imaginative world of stories and a child's imagination. It encapsulates the wonderment and pleasure that most of us

have experienced in the past.

We can all recall a time when we went off on imaginary adventures spawned by the stories we heard from an elder, maybe a parent or grandparent. This connection gives rise to nostalgic memories of times spent on a loved elder's lap and other related memories. On reading this haiku, I fondly remembered sitting at night with my sister on the steps in front of our house, hearing the stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata from my parents. And this brings further memories.

Of course, there is also the possibility of the fear of the unknown that we have all experienced as kids. Listening to some gory details of fairy tales often incites the imagination of kids to make up even scarier details which may result in dreams and nightmares. So, nearly everyone can connect to it. "Falling into the rabbit hole," as an expression, came into being after Alice in Wonderland. This connection reinforces the essence of the haiku.

All in all, this deceptively simple haiku says a lot more than its words through the associations it evokes.

As an aside, I note that "story time" is also the name of programs on certain religious websites and radio stations, often with a proselytizing agenda. This also could lead people down a rabbit hole . . .

And Peter Newton brings it from the child's perspective home to us as adults:

John's got a strong series of poems that feature childhood variations in his body of work. Some great poems. And this is another.

This is the story of childhood writ small and also as large as one's imagination allows — told from the adult's perspective. He hints at the engrossing power of a well-told tale. He references our willingness when we are young to run away as far and fast as we can into the unknown. But the act of falling down suggests harm. What a toll time can take on a person. While an hour of storytelling can transport a person to miraculous realms of rabbitry. A lifetime can also bring a person to "fall further down." To become disoriented a la Alice in Wonderland. So this child-centric poem suddenly turns into a poem about aging. The distance fallen from that first "story hour." Time is the central point I take away from John's poem. How precious it is. Psychedelic

because that's what time is. Mind-altering. And sacred as a tale to a child.

Our winner this week is Jo McInerney, who identified some of the metaphor's reach for us today:

John McManus's haiku suggests the power of the imagination when taken by a captivating narrative. Through 'story hour' it presents story-telling as a spoor we follow to strange new worlds.

John's allusion to Lewis Carroll's 'rabbit hole' metaphor places the storyteller as gatekeeper, spirit-guide, midwife drawing the reader or listener through the passage between one realm of existence and another.

One particularly interesting aspect of this haiku is the use of 'further'. This suggests we actually live by way of imaginative re-creation, constantly moving further down the 'rabbit hole' as we birth and rebirth our own existence. We may be our own myth makers, the creators of our own stories. 'Fall' seems to imply the inevitability of this process. It may not be something over which we have conscious control.

As this week's winner, Jo gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 18

their wings like cellophane remember cellophane
— Lorin Ford (*Roadrunner IX:2*, 2009)

The act of remembering is a fraught exercise, especially when conjoined with such elusive material as Lorin's challenging poem. Scott Mason, with apologies to Richard Gilbert, opined:

It's a bird . . . It's a dragonfly . . . It's the poet's consciousness!
And Marion Clarke, also with a nod toward Gilbert, fleshed this out:
This delicate monostich with its 'wings like cellophane' whispers to me of dragonflies, colour and sunlight. However, it takes a twist when it suggests that the wings 'remember cellophane.' "But how can this be?" the reader asks. Such an unexpected statement requires us to reread the words in order to attempt to make sense of the ku. We realize that it goes beyond a natural observation in which the writer is comparing the translucence of dragonfly wings with a man-made material, but what can it really mean?
Perhaps 'remember cellophane' is imperative, begging the reader not to forget the natural beauty of dragonfly wings? It could also be an environmental statement or sci-fi ku in which the author addresses a member of a future race that has long-since departed an abandoned earth. Finally, although I'm not familiar with dragonfly anatomy, the repetition in 'like cellophane remember cellophane' is like a pulse that might echo their movement when at rest.

Of course, it's difficult to read any reference to dragonflies in a disjunctive haiku and not think of Jim Kacian's famous:

my fingerprints
on the dragonfly
in amber

and Richard Gilbert's essay "The Disjunctive Dragonfly: A Study of Disjunctive Method and Definitions in Contemporary English-language

Haiku” in which he discusses the use of this literary technique.

I’m not saying that I totally understand Lorin’s haiku, and perhaps that was not her intention, but it is sufficiently open to make me stop and think about the use of language. In any case, there is a sentence in Richard’s essay that begins, “There are several varieties of disjunction used in excellent haiku . . .” and I think that Lorin’s poem is a fine example.

Jo McInerney explains the technique, and then grounds it in the real:

Lorin Ford’s one-liner opens by reaching for a simile. ‘[T]heir wings like’ and there it is, the comparison — cellophane. We realize we are probably being shown a dragon- or a damselfly.

‘Cellophane’ at first seems a slightly jarring comparison, one without the obviously beautiful connotations of gossamer. However, the image-maker is not looking for poetic effect. Cellophane has a shine and transparency that is just about right because without the winged creatures being named we know what they are.

Yet the poem is focused as much on this substance as on what is being described. Perhaps the writer has been taken back to childhood memories of gifts and lollies, cellophane-wrapped. There is a lovely spoken quality here — ‘remember cellophane’, a gentle wonder in the call to remember, as well a longing for confirmation. Thus the one-liner creates a sense of transience, a wistful recall of what once was and we are brought back to the ephemeral creatures with which it begins.

And Cynthia Rowe unpacks the variety implicit in the exotic word choice:

Lorin’s haiku provokes the reader, stirring the imagination. The simile ‘like’ is overt and yet we don’t know which insect’s wings are ‘like’ cellophane. Our thoughts are drawn to dragonflies and their whirring. Then again Lorin could be referring to cicadas whose wings vibrate and crackle in the way that cellophane does. She asks us to remember the ubiquitous product cellophane, which of course we do, particularly every Christmas when we wrap presents to place under the tree. The haiku could also refer to Christmas beetles. The

kigo could be implied by the word 'cellophane'; the speculation of the insect that the poet might be referring to is endless . . .

This week's prize goes to Kathe L. Palka, who "remembers":

I do remember cellophane! My fondest memory is of its use to wrap the sweet popcorn balls my mother ordered yearly from the Sears and Roebuck catalog and had delivered to our farm at Christmastime. Wrapped in jewel tones of crinkly cellophane the arrival of those special treats marked for me the start of our family holiday celebrations as a child. But over time cellophane as a packaging material, although still used, has been eclipsed by modern plastics. I imagine Lorin Ford's inspiration for "their wings" to have been the observation of flying insects with clear or even the translucent jewel toned wings of dragonflies or damselflies. Their wings jogging a memory, perhaps one similar to mine, of cellophane use in the past, some use now less often seen. There is a strong element of time and movement present in this monostich. Movement along a continuum echoed in her choice of formatting. The quick flitting of wings flying in a straight line, then pausing or changing direction works to evoke memory and the redirecting of the observer's thoughts and attention. There are strong connections made between the world of nature and the world of humanity and science. The insects and their fragile wings, the stronger but visually similar extruded cellulose of man-made cellophane, our own human lives and the memory of it all will eventually surrender to time's passage. To delve further into the poem's scientific aspect, the word "remember" serves both to invite the reader into the poem's experience and to recall the natural essence of cellophane which is completely biodegradable itself, made by dissolving naturally occurring cellulose (from wood, cotton and other sources) using chemical additives. And so the past dissolves into the present and all things breakdown and are absorbed and remade. People, insects, cellophane, memory. All elements of this haiku work together to create a rich and fully realized poem using only five words with one repeated.

As this week's winner, Kathe gets to choose next week's poem.

RE₃VIRALS 10

dry heat —
to the same withered flower
a bee returns

— Charles Easter (*Frogpond* XXII:3, 1999)

Marion Clarke found a moral lesson here:

This haiku reminded me of the proverb:

'Tis a lesson you should heed:
Try, try, try again.
If at first you don't succeed,
Try, try, try again

— William Edward Hickson (1803–1870)

It also highlights the driving force and unending cycle of nature; despite the hostile environment with its 'dry heat' the bee still returns to the 'same, withered flower' either to collect nectar or pollinate.

But Jo McInerney found something more from the ecology:

A dramatic decrease in the number of bees, especially in the northern hemisphere, has become yet another marker of environmental degradation. In 1999 concern over declining bee numbers did not appear necessary. In Charles Easter's haiku, the bee displays a curious persistence, a pointless return to a flower which can yield no pollen. However, it does not make an appearance until line three. What the reader is shown first is "dry heat" and then its impact on the physical environment — the "withered flower". Despite the dash at the end of the fragment, line two functions like a pivot, the flower is affected by the heat from line one and visited by the bee of line three.

It is interesting that it is "the same flower". This suggests the ongoing nature of

the environmental damage. This is not a dried flower; it is a “withered” one. Its loss of vitality is not deliberate and preservative, rather regretted, yet in its desiccated state it has been effectively embalmed. This is the conservation of death, carrying the awful suggestion of a lifeless and unchanging world. The last line gives us the bee. Two features of this line seem particularly significant. Firstly, it is a single bee; there is no abundance of insect life. Then there is the fact that it “returns” to this flower. It appears there are no life-giving options available to it. It seems analogous to the dove in Genesis, flying out repeatedly over the devastating waters seeking somewhere to land. But here a lack of water is the affliction and there seems no likely hope of fruitfulness or forgiveness. It is impossible not to sympathise with this small creature in its doomed endeavours.

I recently listened to an interview with Francine Banwarth videoed by The Haiku Foundation. She suggested that some forms of political statement are the legitimate province of haiku. Not crude propagandising, but an attitude of awareness which grows out of the acute engagement with the natural world which haiku fosters.

Whatever Charles Easter’s intent, this haiku seems a powerful warning of some of the consequences of climate change. To observe faithfully can sometimes be to predict.

As this week’s winner, Jo gets to choose next week’s poem.

REVIRALS 20

envelope my thumb slips open the seal of his tongue

— Janice M. Bostok (*Amongst the Graffiti: Collected Haiku and Senryu 1972-2002, 2005*)

Marion Clarke sets the table for us in regarding this classic poem from the godmother of Australian haiku:

A highly-charged haiku that is all the more effective for having been written in one-line format, thereby building up tension until we get to the unexpected image of ‘his tongue’ at the end. This immediately demanded that I reread the monoku — just to savour the surprise once more!

And John Stevenson brings us further into its realm:

We live in a time in which miracles surpass miracles, to the point that we become insensible of the miraculous.

We call it “snail mail” now; and not out of a sense of wonder or admiration. It seems absurdly clumsy and old fashioned to carry on our conversations by post now. And those who have never done so may have forever missed the experience of entrusting words to invisible others who deliver those words from our hand to the hand of our intended correspondent, sometimes on the other side of our planet. The same miracle is occurring right now, though the agency of “invisible others” is more invisible than ever before.

This poem manages to add to the miraculous a strong sensation of the erotic. If the writer and reader are of one mind, the Eros arrives entirely intact and undiminished by the invisible others.

And it’s clear that Jan’s poems speak keenly to her fellow Aussies. Here’s Marietta McGregor’s astute take:

This haiku begins with the initially prosaic image of the ‘opening of an envelope.’ Then it quickly reveals its true colours: like so many of Janice

Bostok's poems, it reaches sublime heights of sensuality. We see the poet sliding a thumb into the envelope, clearly thinking about how the missive has been sealed — with the tongue of a lover, two slow licks the length of the gum. There's a sense of anticipation, regarding both the letter and the sensation of the touch and moistness of those sealing lips.

Of course, another reading could be that some mystery has been penetrated, something heretofore hidden from the poet which will now be revealed when this letter is opened. The sliding sibilance of the s serves to heighten the anticipation.

Sad to say, it's a museum piece as well — in the age of self-adhesive envelopes, no-one writing about letter-opening will ever call to mind that slow sensual caress of a tongue on funny-tasting gum!

However, pride of place belongs to Jo McInerney's keen dissection of the poem's many elements:

The meaning of Bostok's monoku unfolds or evolves over the course of the line in a way peculiar to some one-liners. They are poems of transformation, rather like some of Escher's etchings, where the images shapeshift across the page, morphing from one form to another, overlapping as they do so.

It opens by calling attention to an 'envelope'. The word is not preceded by an article; it is almost as though the envelope were being addressed (pun not intended). There is an inevitable pause after the first word. If this were a three-line haiku, this single word would occupy the first line. What does the pause do? Create a sense of expectancy; suggest the potential importance of the message within? Imply that the speaker has recognised the handwriting, knows from whom this is sent? Yes, on all counts, I think. Then there is an apparently simple action. The envelope is being unsealed, but for just a second there is the possibility the speaker's thumb has been cut, 'my thumb slips open'. Paper cut? Something worse? There is a fleeting suggestion of pain. But no, it is 'the seal' of the envelope that is being broken. Yet the previous 'misreading' leaves an after-image. The letter has significance, perhaps the capacity to wound. Then the poem delivers its greatest surprise, the seal that is being opened is 'the seal of his tongue'.

The 'seal of his tongue' could mean no more than his silence, but when 'thumb' and 'tongue' are suddenly brought together the result is startlingly sexual. Opening an envelope has been transformed into part of an act of lovemaking. On a literal level the description is no more than accurate — the speaker's thumb is opening an envelope sealed by the tongue of the man who sent it. However, that is not the predominant image the monoku creates. "Thumb" and 'tongue' seem to touch in the same intimate space. Interestingly, a penetrative role has been assigned to the apparently female speaker. Indeed, the more the haiku is considered the more the various actions potentially performed by each lover challenge the reader's erotic imagination.

For the time at which it was written, perhaps for any time, this is an audacious haiku, both in form and content. However, Bostok's one-liner is not only a witty wordplay intended to amuse. It is a revelation of the multiple dimensions of intimacy and their capacity to be embodied in word.

As this week's winner, Jo gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 21

dry wheat grass . . .
the whiteness of
a child dying

— Robert D. Wilson (*A Lousy Mirror*, 2011)

Jo McInerney has taken the unusual step of commenting on her own selection, which provides insight into why she wanted to give this poem greater exposure:

I think Wilson's haiku is on the very edge of what literature can do, reaching off the page and deep into the ethical lives of readers. It is appalling in the original sense — it leaves the reader dismayed. It is a challenge to our shared humanity and to whatever beliefs we hold about what makes life meaningful. It begins benignly enough with “dry wheat grass”. This is a soft-sounding line — the first two words, with their long vowel sounds, the doubly aspirated wh, the gentle sibilance of grass, combine to allow us to hear what seems like a sigh of the wind. The sigh is attenuated via the ellipsis. The second line continues the effect, again a long vowel, aspirance and sibilance in whiteness; however, this is followed by the syntactically odd enjambment through of; the line-end coming mid-phrase forces the reader to pause when s/he would normally continue smoothly to the next line. The reader may use the pause to begin to consider the significance of whiteness. A first thought could be to associate it with the grass, with its pale, bleached colour in late summer. Line three is confounding. The whiteness we find relates to “a child dying”. The mind is likely to recoil from this image and then wonder, perplexedly, how such a distressing occurrence connects to whiteness. Whiteness has a long associative history in European culture — suggestive of innocence, purity, and joy. I don't think this death is being offered as a cause for joy; instead the terrible disjunction between death and young, innocent life is felt. On a realistic rather than a symbolic level, there is a link with the pallor of inadequate blood flow, restricted breath, malnutrition. The reader is taken back to line one and an additional significance emerges. That “dry wheat grass” may be a blighted crop, the young shoots killed by drought before

the grain can form and ripen, leaving people only grass to eat. News reports or historical accounts of those enduring such circumstances may stir in the reader's mind; however, the haiku confronts us with nothing remote in place or time. There is no comfort to be taken in distance.

Line three wracks our compassion. This is not a dead child; it is "a child dying". The child's suffering is in the present continuous — happening now, still happening. Those whispered initial lines and the catch at the end of line two now seem to mimic the sufferer's shallow, halting breath. It is difficult to read, even as a vicarious experience.

For me this haiku has echoes of Melville's chapter on whiteness in *Moby Dick*. The narrator, far closer here to Melville than Ishmael, states, "It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me." What follows is a discourse on whiteness and its significance in many cultural contexts. It concludes by suggesting the colour is terrifying because it implies a void, an absolute lack of meaning beneath the surface values humanity attaches to existence. I think Wilson's haiku confronts us with a similar prospect. How can there be meaning in a world where such things happen? I find this haiku highly disconcerting, at least in part because to do no more than discuss it seems self-indulgence.

It is against this background that our other commentary, by Marion Clarke, might be read:

This is a heart-wrenching haiku from Robert D. Wilson that compares the colour of the dying child's skin to that of the pale wheat grass, or perhaps the fact that the wheat grass is dry and brittle rather than thriving and healthy. Many believe that wheat grass has health benefits — perhaps the mother of this child had been trying to provide some nourishment in the hope of a cure, but now it lies shriveled up beside the small body.

Or perhaps the wind rippling through a dry field of wheat grass is like the last breath from the child . . .

Tragic.

As this week's winner, Marion gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 22

dripping tap
I begin to think
you're right

— Rachel Sutcliffe (*Frogpond* 36.3, 2013)

Marion Clarke, who suggested this week's poem, provides some possible insider information:

Although we've never met in person, I have been reading Rachel's work on an online writing forum for a number of years now and I know she suffers from serious immune disorders. When I spotted this haiku some time ago, I immediately assumed (and I may be totally wrong) that it was inspired by one of her hospital visits. For me, a dripping tap is one of those annoying noises of which I often don't take any notice until it has driven me crazy with its relentless drip, drip, dripping. Perhaps the author is likening this sound to series of relentless test results. There is a lot of tension in the haiku, in any case.

And Jo McInerney expertly parses its small erosion in this way:

It is the openness of the fragment and phrase and the subtle variety of the potential interactions between them that do much to make Sutcliffe's haiku so effective.

Line one, "dripping tap", is highly evocative. The power of a dripping tap lies in its persistence; its capacity to interrupt thought, especially at night. It has the power to disrupt in part because of what it seems to symbolise — all of that which is outside our control; those things we cannot fix. It also implies a constant, uncontrolled waste. Its drumming can seem to echo our own heartbeat, a measure of time which suggests our slow, inevitable progress toward death.

All these possibilities from line one then play off against lines two and three. A specific second-person listener is addressed, someone who has previously

expressed a view with which the speaker has begun to agree. Who is this other? What is the relationship between the two? We have very little to go on.

It is possible that this other person has nagged the speaker into agreement with a relentlessness analogous to that of the dripping tap. However, that does not seem quite right. There is no resentment in the speaker's response; indeed it is quietly, if hesitantly, considered: "I begin to think". Perhaps the tap and/or the other speaker's words have prompted thought rather than interrupted it.

And what is being considered? What tentative agreement has been reached? We do not know, but the possibility is there that it relates to the ideas suggested by the drip of the tap — the limitations of human action and the unavoidable nature of death. These are not easy insights to arrive at and accept. As readers we can empathise with the gradualness and perhaps the reluctance of the recognition.

And Garry Eaton adopts its strategy:

An excellent example of a juxtaposition that is also an objective correlative. In this haiku, a dripping tap seems to emphasize the silence that follows an unresolved domestic disagreement. Its even, measured reiteration, like the ticking of a clock, may also provide a detached point of reference for at least one of the combatants as she tries to reflect calmly on what has been said on both sides. In contrast to the irrational outbursts of intense argument, it represents the possibility for a more controlled release of the pressure of emotions. "Drip, drip, drip," it is essentially saying. "Calm down, calm down, calm down." Time passes, cooler heads prevail.

As this week's winner, Garry gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 23

followed home
by a dog i don't know —
autumn dusk

— Jim Kacian, Robert Spiess Memorial Haiku Contest (2007)

Marion Clarke speaks of this poem with experience:

This haiku is one of those that manages to make me smile and feel a sense of sadness almost at the same time. The narrator has been followed home by a dog he doesn't towards the end of the day (and the year) perhaps because it is lost. This has happened to me a few times quite recently — happily I reunited the animal with its owner in all three cases (even one when on holiday in Portugal!)

But it is that last line that makes this a sad ku. This is probably an old dog in its autumn years and it has latched onto the narrator. I hadn't realised until just before Christmas, when we fostered a stray cat for a few weeks, that animals become very affectionate when ill or in pain. I have a feeling there might be a similar narrative in this poem.

Kathe L. Palka finds further resonance in the season:

At first glance we see a possibly lost dog simply following the speaker home at night. It is autumn, and the evenings grow chilly. The dog is perhaps in need of shelter and a meal. Things the speaker could likely provide if he decided to. Both are alone, maybe both lonely and sharing a need for company. A haiku flavored with a deeply traditional sense of *sabi*. But underlying the needy dog, their shared loneliness, and the decision to let the dog in and help it or not, there is perhaps something else needling the speaker's consciousness. A hint at a different choice to be made. Some other event or need, previously unknown, is dogging him, having entered somehow into his sphere of experience and now quietly but persistently demanding his attention, his action. It's the end of a day in autumn which hints at the prospect of a late life

event — maybe retirement or an unforeseen career change. A potential health issue or a family issue. Something common, but previously unexperienced has followed him home and is begging his attention. Each reader will see the “dog” through the lens of their own experience. A fine haiku in which there are many possibilities to be imagined.

While Scott Mason needs two dogs to fetch his point:

In the field of visual perception there’s a striking effect — first identified in the 19th century by French polymath Michel Eugène Chevreul — known as simultaneous contrast. If you were to take two identical swatches of colored cloth or paper (let’s say they’re purple) and place them against differently colored backgrounds (say, one on navy blue, the other on a light lavender), the two swatches would suddenly look different from one another in hue.

An analogous effect takes place in the “perception” of poems (and much else): a given poem will be “colored” differently against the background of different readers’ personal experiences.

For some readers Jim Kacian’s intriguing poem could perhaps trigger thoughts of animal rescue (think St. Bernard in reverse) and maybe, more generally, the opportunities for personal redemption which might present themselves in the “autumn” of one’s life. A heartwarming evocation . . . and my personal “background” will have none of it. Instead I sense more than a whiff of mortality here. Whatever else may be operating in my psyche, this haiku instantly reminded me of another by Robert Spiess:

the field’s evening fog —
quietly the hound comes
to fetch me home

Of course the two have their obvious differences. For one thing, Spiess’s hound is leading and Kacian’s dog is following. For another, “the hound” seems to be familiar to the speaker in the first poem; just the opposite applies to the “dog i don’t know” in the second. The result, for me, is a feeling of comfort (or at least acceptance) from the Spiess poem and one of ominousness from

Kacian's. But the end-of-life overtones that I discerned in the former have undoubtedly "colored" my reading of the latter.

The only certainty is that we're each followed (and occasionally dogged) by the memories, associations or projections which derive from our different personal experiences. But as Chevruel might have put it, vive la difference!

As this week's winner, Scott gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 24

no one calls
she gently dusts
her porcelain rabbits

— Elena Naskova (*Nest Feathers: Selected Haiku from the First 15 Years of The Heron's Nest*, 2015)

This quiet but fraught tableau fairly hums with electricity beneath the surface. Marion Clarke takes this to be a family drama:

The first line of this haiku leads the reader to believe that this woman has been waiting on someone to call, but they haven't turned up. In the second and third lines 'gentle' and 'porcelain' suggest such delicateness that this is perhaps an old lady and the fact that these are china rabbits made me think it is her children she has been waiting for in vain. Very sad.

And Garry Eaton discovers an analogue in one of 20th-century drama's most famous productions:

This reminds me of *The Glass Menagerie*, in which a shy young woman, damaged by polio, invests herself in fantasies around a collection of delicate, glass animals at the expense of her opportunities for fuller human relationships. Her favorite, the unicorn, both Christian and sexual symbol, gets damaged as she dances with her only potential suitor. He accidentally knocks it off the shelf, breaking its horn, and she gives it away to him at the end of the play as a sign of her capitulation to her own damaged condition and her lonely fate.

Here, it is porcelain rabbits that are the objects of a lonely woman's obsession. They too carry symbolic associations — here with Christ's resurrection and with sexual reproduction — and the two works are further connected by the suggestion of a wounded and inverted narcissism in the character at the center of the each.

I enjoy the way the alliterative sibilance underscores the sadness in the

tender dusting and hints at a concern for her aging ovaries.

While Tzetzka Ilieva finds a way in which the poem has potentially evolved over time:

I like the fragility of the situation.

I can see her hand, moving slowly, almost automatically. She has been doing this so many times before. And it looks like she is perfectly calm and content, but I can't help waiting for her to suddenly sweep a few rabbits off the shelf, thus breaking into pieces her porcelain life. Or maybe the phone, or the door bell would ring, and that sound would startle her just enough to knock down a rabbit, to break the routine.

While reading more poems from this author, I found a slightly different version of the haiku:

no one called
she gently dusts
her porcelain rabbits

The past tense would make the situation final — no one called and no one will call. That's it. The porcelain life is all she has. I don't know why the author decided to change it, but I prefer the version in the present tense. She seems more in control of her life in this one.

As this week's winner, Tzetzka gets to choose next week's poem.

re:VIRALS 25

Deep
in the inkwell
a star.

— Alexis Rotella (*The Haiku Anthology*, 1999)

Peter Newton finds a metaphor for the creative process in this classic haiku:

What I find helpful about re:Virals is its invitation to explore a poem beyond two or three readings. Sometimes, I don't know what I think about something unless I write about it. In Rotella's poem I see the vast blackness of space. A metaphor for the mind. Anyone who has stared up at the night sky can attest to its awesome and sometimes unsettling effect. Here, the poet sees an inkwell. A wellspring of creativity. A source of inspiration. A star — the goal of any poet. A wish that comes true. A truth that just appears. But not without effort. Writing is akin to space exploration. An act of probing the mind.

And Garry Eaton parses the images themselves to plumb its depths:

In this fascinating haiku, the precise matching of two elusive images opens doors to a spectrum of possible meanings. On one level, the reader/writer sees a gleam of light reflected in the blackness of an open inkwell and makes an imaginative leap, risking paradox, to call it a star. However, the brevity of this haiku and its lack of specificity in how the images relate allow the images to oscillate in the mind, revealing that the star can also be read as a literal object in a literal night sky described here as an 'inkwell'. If we imagine space as in the mind of an old astronomer, the inkwell becomes the lens of his telescope and the haiku a trope that mimics his ancient search for meaning in the constellations.

These two related interpretations partially resolve on another level, where the haiku turns self-reflexive and the search for a star is refocused onto the imaginative process of discovering meaning (and by extension, the universe

itself) in the darkness of ink and mind.

As this week's winner, Garry gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 26

AIDS rally
the p.a.'s echo

“our friends (friends), lovers (lovers) . . .”

— John Stevenson (*Something Unerasable*, 1996)

Our featured poet writes:

I am not taking part in this officially. I presume that the writer of the poem is not eligible. Just want to comment. I am both pleased and surprised to see this poem here. I remember so distinctly the moment depicted. I was early for a regional H.S.A. meeting at Kent Hall on the Columbia University campus. The building was almost empty and I decided to explore it. I bet I could go back there right now and find the exact classroom, exact window through which I heard this.

I used to include this poem in my public readings. It works better when spoken than it does on the page, in my opinion. I haven't recited it for, probably, ten years now because A.I.D.S. is not the the unspoken thing it was and I haven't been sure if an A.I.D.S. rally would register for younger people in the audience.

Tzetzka Ilieva seized immediately upon the poet's technique as the crucial element of this poem:

Beautiful use of the echo. When hearing “our friends' friends”, we become certain that the attending audience will keep on repeating the message and reaching more people, yet “our lovers' lovers” brings that uneasy feeling that the virus has already spread way farther than we imagine.

Some haiku work because they radiate peace, this one works because it disturbs our peace.

I'm looking forward to reading other readers' comments because I had trouble deciding what to make of this poem. I still don't know if the echo represents only the fact that we are all together in this situation, or there is

also a fine irony embedded in that same togetherness, or maybe the irony is in the fact that it's the echo, not the people, that first hears and repeats the message . . . My compliments to Garry for his choice!

As this week's winner, Tzetzka gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 27

The shell I take,
the shell it takes
— ebb tide

— Vincent Tripi (Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years,
2013)

Peter Newton offers his own take, but doesn't leave it at that:

Here is a world in balance. An optimist's view. A positive outlook. A poem that says we are all caught in the in-between tide, the ebb tide where sand and sea parcel out what is taken and what is allowed to remain. A poem about humility in the face of the all-powerful sea itself. A nature-lover's poem. At least these were my initial thoughts upon re-reading this poem of vince's. Since vince is a friend I decided to call him up and ask him about his poem. Here's what he said (with his permission): "Yeah, I wrote that around 1990 in San Francisco. It's a poem about loneliness and impermanence. Jean-Paul Sartre said all poetry is about endings and I agree. We're all ending, in a way. Ebbing. This poem is about reaching out to pick up a shell. The ocean is lonely too. And it is also reaching out to pick up a shell. Nature is, after all, the other half of us. Thing is we are never separated from nature. When we reconnect with nature we stop the ebbing and hold onto life." Agreed. Thanks v.

Marion Clarke adds:

It was the movement in this haiku that struck me first, the almost onomatopoeic repetition of sound in L2, suggesting the action of endless waves arriving and retreating from the shore. Then, the use of the verb 'take' in the actions, 'I take' and 'it takes', reminded me of players making their moves in a game of chess, each player taking their turn to lift their opponent's pieces. However, 'ebb tide' reminds us that man's time at the game of life is finite; we

are weak opponents against Mother Nature who will eventually take back anything we might have taken . . . and we will, ultimately, be reclaimed by her ourselves.

And Judt Shrode's response to this classic poem is immediate, but then opens:

As I experience it, this shining little poem's simple transaction expands in a remarkable way.

In the first two lines, the rhythmic pull of the back and forth of waves (and by extension the in and out of tides) is palpable. It draws me, almost literally, into a rocking motion.

The sameness of these lines then sets up a question of contrast. In my reading, the "other" shell is being claimed by the outgoing tide. This then alludes to the ineluctable power of tides and the forces that cause them . . . and in comparison the relative frailty of the human individual. In this context the person remains irrelevant. On the other hand, it would seem that in taking a particular shell from among others he is exercising his human power of choice and self determination.

But in the poem's moment of give and take, there is recognition that that freedom of choice is an illusion. These shells belong to the sea. Only at random are certain ones made available — or reclaimed — by the tides.

As this week's winner, Judt gets to choose next week's poem.

REVIRALS 28

by firelight
listening to the silence
of things we can't see

— Larry Gross (*Haiku Moment: An Anthology of Contemporary North American Haiku*, 1993)

Larry Gross's fine poem prompts Marion Clarke into a flight of fancy:

Quite a cosy atmosphere is evoked in the first line, which could be describing a fireside scene, either indoors or outside. In line two we are almost thrown a riddle — how can we listen to something that's not there? Then in the third line, there is a suggestion of something other-worldly around the fire with us, perhaps the ghosts of ancestors. However, the author doesn't use the noun 'people', he says 'things' we can't see, ending this ku on a much darker note than it opened.

Then again, he could just be describing a hedgehog snuffling about for beetles!

But it has a more personal resonance for Kathe L. Palka:

This poem immediately puts me in mind of a little piece of my father's folksy wisdom I've always tried to carry with me: You don't know what you don't know. And a related piece of wisdom I've often heard: A wise man knows what he doesn't know. I didn't connect fully to the breadth of meaning in my father's little saying until I was a new young undergraduate, eager to learn and a bit full of myself. After expressing my surprise to a wiser friend in discovering that there were whole avenues in academic research and study of which I had been previously completely unaware, my friend replied with a wry laugh, Yup. Whole books have been written about stuff you don't know. So for me this tiny poem by Larry Gross is about awareness of our limitations, our own unavoidable ignorance and the fact that the universe and our small place in it, no matter how connected to it we may be, is ultimately beyond

our complete understanding and experience. In terms of the language of the poem, firelight can be thought of in this context as the range of our direct human experience and knowledge. Wisdom is then our awareness of the silence in which things exist beyond the firelight — beyond our full knowledge. So while at the surface this rich haiku describes people around a campfire or hearth listening to the silence of the night, knowing that there are creatures and objects quietly living/existing beyond the reach of the firelight — metaphorically it is about much more. A much broader range of human existence. It is about the wisdom in awareness and also perhaps our acceptance of how great the “unknowable” is beyond our individual abilities and experiences.

As this week’s winner, Kathe gets to choose next week’s poem.

REVIRALS 20

Holding the water,
held by it —
the dark mud.

— William J. Higginson (*The Unswept Path*, 2005)

Scott Mason finds the balance poised in this classic haiku:

One of the miracles of life is its sheer improbability. With all our ability to see light years away and eons ago there's only the slightest evidence of life elsewhere or before. The conditions must be just so, their balance so delicate. These thoughts bubbled up as I once again savored this classic haiku with its two earthly elements in perfect suspension. How strange and wonderful it is that such a circumscribed poem — an exemplar of “interpenetration” if ever there was one — should so expand one's consciousness. But such is the quantum potential and the glory of this, our most atomic, poetic form.

And Marion Clarke related it to the small elements of our daily lives:

I get a real sense of reverence in this haiku. Taken literally, the narrator appears to be in awe of the fact that water, this life-giving source, can be contained in the mud and he is blessed to be holding it. Although I don't know the background of the ku, it could have been written while standing at a watering hole somewhere in Africa.

Metaphorically speaking, I read mud as the problems or darkness in our lives and the water within represents those small chinks of light that keep us going, against all odds.

While Pratima Balabhadrapathruni relates it to the cosmos:

The *Mantrapushpam*, a Vedic chant, states implicitly that the cosmic water is the creator and perpetuator of heat and therefore light, and therefore life and all matter that originates from heat and light and water.

In this haiku music is created by the alliteration provided by the 'hh' sounds. It benefits from the sound quality of the word ending with a 'k' and a short word ending with a 'd'. There is also a hint at the cyclic nature of life emphasized by the repetition of 'holding' and 'held'.

The speaker in the haiku cites water and mud. Water salvaged from a puddle, when left aside, will eventually cradle a layer of sediment.

The puddle is contained in the mud, and some mud dissolves into it. Neither suffers a loss of identity. Nevertheless, neither escapes the influence of the other. Perfect because of the inherent harmony. Could I call it perfect YinYang?

As this week's winner, Pratima gets to choose next week's poem.

REVIRALS 30

along the roadside
Dixie cups
of summer wind . . .

— Michael McClintock (*Nest Feathers: Selected Haiku from the First 15 Years of The Heron's Nest*, 2015)

Marion Clarke had her eyes opened by this poem:

I must admit, I thought a Dixie cup was a type of flower — I've obviously lived a very sheltered life here in Ireland! Despite opening with an ominous setting that could have progressed to a tragic image, such as a homeless person or an animal that has been run over, this haiku progresses with those rolling cups to reveal a bright and breezy ending! Enchanting.

And John Stevenson considers it an old friend:

Since this is a favorite of mine, I can't let it pass without comment. I love poetry that is precise about measuring the unmeasurable. Are these Dixie cups half full of the summer wind or half empty? It seems to me that this is exactly how seriously we should take ourselves. Some may encounter these as unsightly litter, and they wouldn't be wrong. Others may see in this a moment of unutterable beauty, and they wouldn't be wrong. Perhaps these are escapees from a child's lemonade stand. Perhaps these are discarded refreshments for marathon runners. More likely, we have to encounter them as mostly unexplained; the kind of secondary things that Wallace Stevens identified in "Man Carrying Thing."

Peter Newton has a darker take:

The haiku begins casually enough with an observation of an almost overlooked scene "along the roadside." But its pivotal second line "Dixie

cups” interjects man not necessarily in nature but ON nature and through it. Man as a polluter. And further than that we have “Dixie cups/ of summer wind” as if McClintock is rebranding the summer wind itself. In other words: the summer wind brought to you by Dixie cups. Perhaps a sad commentary on our awareness of nature in the sense that we overlook it until we see the Dixie cups. As Earth Day approaches (April 22) here is a poem about why we need such a day in the first place. A day that ought to function as this poem does — more as a reminder rather than a remembrance.

As this week’s winner, Peter gets to choose next week’s poem.

RE:VIRALS 31

radiation leak moonlight on the fuel rods

— Melissa Allen (*Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*, 2013)

Alan Summers sums this up tersely:

Where moonlight meets death . . .

And Marion Clarke, nearly as tersely, discerns its message:

In just seven words this monoku reveals a disaster. The moon is a spotlight, highlighting from space the devastation that man has caused on earth. Effective and alarming.

Jo McInerney shows us exactly how the poem is constructed:

Nuclear energy with its destructive capacity in terms of weaponry and waste disposal cast its fearful shadow over the second half of the twentieth century. With non-proliferation treaties and the break-up of the Soviet Union, other fears have come to bulk larger in popular consciousness. Indeed nuclear power is now proposed as a clean replacement for that generated using fossil fuels.

Allen's haiku deftly brings these conflicting potentials into vivid juxtaposition. The first word of the monoku — radiation — continues to evoke the dread first felt in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A dread fed by periodic later disasters such as Chernobyl and Fukushima. Its second word — leak — extends this fear, suggesting the insidious spread of a poison that can be neither seen nor felt yet can kill and maim into subsequent generations.

Often in monoku, a particular word functions as a pivot, being able to be attached to the words that precede it to create one meaning, and to those that follow it for another. This is almost the case with leak; however, the reader's attempt to shift from a radiation leak to moonlight leaking is thwarted.

For this reading to be possible, Allen would have to have written radiation leaks. Instead, what we are left with is a caesura after leak. Thus there is a disjunction between radiation leak and moonlight which seems appropriate as the latter is beautiful and benign and the former is profoundly not.

Allen then disturbs our expectations again and has the moonlight fall across fuel rods. What is the intended effect of this? A benison? A suggestion that our fears are misplaced? Perhaps. But for this reader, at least, the effect is ironic. Moonlight is, like radiation, tasteless and odourless, unable to be touched, yet, unlike radiation, it is completely without harm. This poem ultimately seems a warning not to mistake the continuing threat of nuclear energy for something innocuous.

But Stella Pierides brings it all the way back to redemption:

In current usage, the word leak refers to a variety of situations: from leaking a document and bringing into the light a secret, to taking a leak, to a wasteful dripping of water, to seepage of radiation. This poem, with its radiation leak, immediately opens up a danger zone. Step in at your peril into an image that gives rise to paralyzing fears, to the dead zones of Chernobyl, Fukushima; to the forbidden zones. Anything could happen here.

From a leak to a fireball, from the atom to the apocalyptic mushroom cloud, you could be walking into a minefield of the results of unbridled ambition and unscrupulous greed, a Faustian deal . . . Whether the leak is from a technological or scientific project, where man sees himself tirelessly bent on expanding knowledge and power over nature, finding solutions to the human problems of illness, poverty, and environmental degradation; whether hubris or dedication to the common good, here is a consequence: the spewing of poisonous material, the fall into a dark, man-made Hell.

But now the poet brings moonlight on the scene. Like a benevolent, all-seeing Eye of God, moonlight bathes the fuel rods in light we associate with understanding, with cool logic, in forgiveness. I am reminded of the Greek poet Yiannis Ritsos' Moonlight Sonata, where moonlight hides smaller-scale follies such as showing white hair as golden, at the same time relentlessly intensifying shadows. In Allen's poem too, moonlight is both kind and

cooling, as well as relentless and permanent, not allowing the fuel rods to hide in the shadows. An image burned into the mind.

Note that the fuel rods are not spent. The young man in Ritsos' poem too, is present all through the poem, at the end leaving full of energy, bursting into laughter as he walks away. Life continues in its boundless energy, in its perpetual flow, beyond leaks, beyond the night, beyond our human follies, beyond life itself.

As this week's winner, Stella gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 32

honeysuckle
when the river is as slow
as the night

— Burnell Lippy (*The Heron's Nest* XVIII.1, 2016)

Jo McInerney:

Honeysuckle is a beautiful name. The plant itself has all the loveliness of its heady fragrance and pale yellow flowers, a physical reality that fits so well with the sweetness of “honey” and the soft, savouring suggestiveness of “suckle”. I wonder whether Ariel were really inhaling the scent of honeysuckle rather than cowslips when he sang “Where the bee sucks, there suck I.”

“Honeysuckle” brings this perfume to the opening of Lippy’s haiku, given proper prominence by occupying all of line one. The next two lines compliment the opening image. This fragrance hangs over a slow-flowing river, a river in its later stages, no longer making the sudden sallies Tennyson describes in its upper reaches, but meandering toward the sea.

And further, the river “is as slow / as the night”. This is a lovely simile which is more than merely a comparison; it has the languid river flowing through perfumed dark. There is something about night which intensifies scent; perhaps it is merely that we have no visual distractions to divert us from the smell. Perhaps too some flowers give out stronger scents to attractive night-flying insects. And here we have the sweetness further heightened by being borne on the still, moist air above the barely moving water.

To round out this description of a locale and its beautiful mesh of associations the slow movement of the water suggests the sweet, thick trickle of honey, a river of honey carrying its fragrance through the dark air.

As this week’s winner, Jo gets to choose next week’s poem.

REVIRALS 33

your hair drawn back
the sharp taste of radishes

— M. Kettner (*Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*,
2013)

Jo McInerney finds a mythopoeic resonance in the fruit of the garden:

Kettner's remarkable haiku brings sight and taste startlingly together. Line one gives us the curve of a neck, the long sweep up from the shoulder and then the suddenly exposed skin at the nape with the line carrying through to the swelling of the back of the skull. The image is at once vivid, vulnerable and gently sensual.

It is dramatically intensified by line two. "[T]he sharp taste", following on from line one, suggests a love bite. The reader images the pale flesh of the back of the neck marked by teeth or the sampling, sucking pressure of a lover's lips. Then our expectations are subverted. The taste is "of radishes". What a wicked yet apt reversal.

Suddenly we have the red-skinned, roundness of the radish and its white, exposed inner flesh. A beautiful echoing of curves — the shape of the radish, the shape of the bite and behind them both the curve of a human neck and the dome of a human skull.

It works a little like the description of the Grimm Snow-white. "It was the middle of winter, and the snowflakes were falling like feathers from the sky, and a Queen sat at her window working, and her embroidery-frame was of ebony. And as she worked, gazing at times out on the snow, she pricked her finger, and there fell from it three drops of blood on the snow. And when she saw how bright and red it looked, she said to herself, "Oh that I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the embroidery frame!" Not very long after she had a daughter, with a skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood and hair as black as ebony.

Here also, one image overlays the other and their qualities interpenetrate. Not only is Snow-white beautiful, but there is a vulnerability in her virginal

whiteness and the possibility of deflowering in those drops of blood. Later she is poisoned by biting an alluring apple where red, white and the ambivalence of sexual appetite are suggested even more directly.

In Kettner's haiku, sight and taste come wonderfully together. The pungency of the radish takes on a sharply sexual quality such that I don't think I will be able to look at this vegetable in the same way again.

As this week's winner, Jo gets to choose next week's poem.

REVIRALS 34

glimpse of dolphin
beyond the river mouth . . .
friends a youth ago

— Rodney Williams (*Stylus Poetry Journal* 28, 2008)

Janet Marsh neatly parses the elements of Williams' touching poem:

In this poignant haiku Williams captures the elements of memory and youth. It's a 'glimpse' of dolphin — bringing together both its playfulness and protectiveness. The dolphin is wild and free and a glimpse is all that is needed. The image 'beyond the river mouth' spells out childhood's end as the river finishes its journey and spills out into the greater ocean — there is no turning back; life has run its course.

And finally comes the stunning phrase, 'friends a youth ago'. Here age and experience have concertinaed the years but friendship remains.

Garry Eaton fixes it in context:

Nostalgia is the keynote of this haiku, but it avoids sentimentality by framing associations with a happy past time in a powerful image of creatures easily eluding the fragile net of our tender, human feelings. The fleeting dolphin image powers up to a final line in which the pastness of the past can be accepted with an honest, if bittersweet, resignation.

And Cynthia Rowe personalizes it:

As the poet sits, confined to his desk, he recalls the hopes and dreams of his youth, the freedom 'beyond the river mouth', the capacity for intelligent discourse, the ability to learn and be self-aware. He is like the dolphin who has meta-cognitive reasoning typical of humans. He hankers for the playfulness, the joy of simply being. He thinks of his own potential greatness, much as the greatness seen in Greek mythology when dolphins were believed to be

integral to mankind's understanding of the natural world. The poet glimpses his own emergence into adulthood, to noble aspiration and to the success as envisaged in many cultures where dolphins are to be found in multiple coats of arms. The dolphin — revered for its luminosity and acumen. This small poem paints a vast picture in just a few words, a universal picture that we can all relate to. An absolute delight!

But Simon Hanson plumbs it:

This intriguing haiku by Rodney Williams was originally part of a longer sequence In Driftwood — a 'haiku tanka interchange' — first published in Stylus Poetry Journal (Issue 28: January 2008) under the editorship of Janice Bostok. As good writing tends to do, this piece opens up pathways into our own experience and imagination. This haiku and the sequence in which it is embedded take me back to my own youth and its many idle (idyll) hours enjoying the coast, in and out of the water, alone and with others. The coast suggests for me (in large part unconsciously) 'the great other', a boundary between worlds, yet worlds connected (and truth be known wholly One in the bigger context of things). The river mouth too has elements of symbolic allusion, where the long and winding journey of the river eventually finds its way back into the sea, is lost and taken into 'the deep'

— beyond the river mouth . . .

The word 'beyond' is especially effective in this context, taking us out and away, into that other realm, the sea. The judicious use of ellipses here gives us time to pause, invite us to dream a while on the suggestions of this line,

beyond . . .

There is beauty and sadness here, *sabi*.

Ah, the dolphin — what a wonderful creature it is, embodying intelligence, benevolence and grace and believed by many ancient Greeks to carry the souls of the dead into the afterlife. Of course I do not know if such

symbolism were or were not consciously intended, but like so much of the truly creative, symbolisms and meanings sometimes find their way into our writing unconsciously and unintended and we as writers discover them afterwards; learning once again that the creative process is something bigger and beyond ourselves. Our momentary notice of this or that ‘particular’ can if we are fortunate be illuminated by the ‘universal’, to have that unmistakable glow of the numinous. The word glimpse is so apt here for that is often the way dolphins are seen, by a quick glimpse and then hidden again — as are occasional insights into deeper truths. There is sunlight here, in a brief flash on the dolphin’s smooth skin as it breaks the surface for air, gliding with effortless grace.

glimpse of dolphin
beyond the river mouth . . .

The longer sequence is full of life, both sides of the coastline; the brahminy kite, breaching whales and their calves, rainbow lorikeets, bottlebrush, sugar cane, a dog at play, osprey, dolphin, pelicans and people too; a girl, a surfer, a busker — again, flashbacks of my own youth, so many images, thoughts, sightings, interactions flutter in and out of memory. Which brings me to the last line

— friends a youth ago

The older we get the quicker the years seem to roll by and it is with some sense of loss that I look back on my own youth slipping into the past, yet seemingly so recent. The music, the times, the friendships, the laughter and tears — come and gone. Sometimes it is best not to comment on art, and perhaps more so with haiku than other forms of art; it is best just to experience it for what it is, to let it speak in its own way. There is an unmistakable ‘depth of the unspoken’ in this haiku and in the last line in particular — depth that moves me, full of beauty and sadness, memory rich.

Thank you, Rodney.

As this week’s winner, Simon gets to choose next week’s poem.

RE=VIRALS 35

thíos anseo
canaid don doircheacht
na míolta móra

down below
singing to the darkness,
great whales

— Buachallán Buí (Ireland; translated from the Irish by the author and Anatoly Kudryavitsky, *Shamrock 25*, 2013)

Jo McInerney:

Buachallán Buí's haiku reveals its mysteries slowly. It opens with the enigmatic 'down below', indicating depth without nominating location. There is, however, a suggestion of the bowels of a ship with an echo of the pumping shanty 'fire down below'. Shanties were working songs, sung to help relieve the tedium of long, constant toil and to keep the sailors working in unison. They were typically sung when the anchor was being laboriously raised or the bilge pumped.

These suggestions are heightened by line two, with its specific references to 'singing' and 'darkness'. The haiku is deliberately staged. All lines are end-stopped, though line two functions as a pivot. This suggests either momentary pauses in the work, or a graduated descent to the bottom. On the face of it, the second option seems unlikely; it is difficult to imagine sailors singing as their vessel sinks. The choice of preposition is highly suggestive. Whatever creature or being is singing is doing so 'to' rather than 'in' the darkness. This implies an intimate connection between the singers and the dark medium within which they are located.

Line three reveals their identity — 'great whales'. The poem shifts completely, from the human dimension to that of permanent denizens of the deep. There is a contrast between the previous potential references to sailors, possibly even whalers, and these creatures occupying a territory which is

solely their own. We are left with a shifting image of the largest mammals on earth (moving in the deepest waters, beyond reach of light) and the plangent sounds they make in a language only other whales properly comprehend. Their singing seems to accentuate the darkness and the silence that settles as the haiku ends. It treats a world framed by mankind, and here re-created by a human imagination, yet one which exists beyond our reach.

Looking at the Irish seems to add to the interpretative possibilities. I do not speak Irish, but online translators suggest some other options which I offer with all appropriate trepidation. ‘Thíos anseo’ can be read as ‘below here’. Gone is the immediate suggestion of something nautical and in its place is a phrase that implies a comparison, or two points of reference. We are placed ‘here’ and then there is a location somewhere below us, either in the earth beneath us, in the waters of ocean, river or lake or, depending on where we are located, in the air. The imaginative possibilities seem wider in the original Irish and there is a stronger initial sense of the speaker.

Line two offers the beautiful, alliterative ‘don doircheach’ as an evocation of darkness. The last line, ‘na míolta móra,’ has a lovely imaginative openness. ‘Míolta’ can be a word applied to any creature. Coupling it with ‘móra’ creates the Irish word for whale. Thus, in Irish, all whales are great. The use of the generic ‘míolta’ suggests the struggle early observers had to come to terms with the creature, to give it a specific name that brought it within the comfortable bounds of human nomenclature. This echoes the Biblical description of a ‘great fish’ for the creature which swallowed Noah. However, it implies an even larger begging of description as the more specific ‘fish’ is not applied. The Irish inversion of the English adjective/noun order leaves the line ending with the resonant ‘móra’ with its concluding open vowel sound reaching out beyond the line like an echo sounding of the whale’s huge bulk. Finally, the Irish has the quality of beautiful noise that attaches to some unfamiliar languages. The alliteration, the diphthongs and long vowel sounds contribute to this effect. It seems to echo the song of the whales themselves — a haunting sound with a meaning human speakers can only wistfully intuit.

As this week’s winner, Jo gets to choose next week’s poem.

REVIRALS 30

a ladder
leans into the loft
winter light

— Susan Constable (*The Heron's Nest* XVII:3, 2015)

Susan's ladder was an immediate vehicle of transport for Scott Mason:

The alliterative ladder in Susan Constable's fine winter haiku delivered me, by free association, to an entirely different time and place.

I instantly pictured myself back beside a reconstructed kiva at Bandelier National Monument in northern New Mexico one late summer day. I can still see the rough-hewn wooden ladder descending into a hidden recess that once held special meaning for a long-departed people.

Summer, not winter; down, not up; then, not now. But the same sense of *sabi*.

An evocative haiku can transport the reader from its ostensible setting to the uncharted depths of his or her consciousness.

Then Jo McInerney, our stalwart for this column, delved in even further:

Susan Constable's haiku has a numinous restraint. Its simplicity is transcendent. The image is like Vermeer's 'Girl with a Water Jug' where the light falling on the young woman's headpiece seems holy.

It would be easy to suggest symbolic possibilities in line one, but what is remarkable about this ladder is it is so completely what it is. Taken with line two it is a mundane piece of equipment, probably farm equipment. The observer seems to have come on a scene in the process of unfolding. There is no human presence in this moment, though there clearly has been and presumably soon will be again. It is a moment of suspended action; like a still from a film showing a setting devoid of actors. There is a sense of life in abeyance; a brief respite in the daily hubbub. Though, to say 'brief' is misleading. The haiku makes this transient moment permanent. This lull is lasting.

The sense of suspension is heightened by what is shown and not shown. The ladder leans into the loft; apparently a mezzanine. Can we see what is above us? Nothing is specified. It is as though the top of the ladder disappears into shadow. '[L]eans into' has an indeterminate quality. A destination has been reached but we are not shown what is there.

Line three brings this haiku to a poignant conclusion. '[W]inter light' is thin, meagre light. It is the consolation offered in cold, hard times. A diffuse, low light compared to the glare of summer. The alliterative 'l's have a soft, lilting quality seeming almost to mimic the incline of the ladder. The ladder seems to parallel the shaft of light. For some there may be a brief transubstantiation where the ladder seems to become a beam of light.

This is a remarkable haiku in which the images take on a subtle resonance without ever appearing props for a metaphor. It is a haiku that suggests the holiness, the transcendental quality of simple things in and of themselves.

As this week's winner, Jo gets to choose next week's poem.

RE=VIRALS 37

dark afternoon
hydrangeas drying
upside down

— Peggy Willis Lyles, *The Heron's Nest V:9* (2003)
Memorial poem for Kylan Jones-Huffman

Angelee Deodhar responds directly to the circumstances of the poem:

This is a fine example of Peggy's understated elegance contrasting the dark of the afternoon, is it late summer or early autumn, milieu exterior with the poet's pensive mood, her own topsy-turvy milieu interior is lightened by the upside down hydrangeas, which are also past their prime yet will preserve their beauty through approaching winter.

While Garry Eaton attends to its details:

So many d's.

It sounds like boots or heavy shoes across board floors in a quiet house.

It sounds hollow, knock on wood!

It sounds like the big 'D,' the more emphatically when you know this is a memorial haiku.

First of all, why hydrangeas? I think because they look lifelike dried, but with the definite appearance of being dead. So they soften death by showing that for awhile at least beauty survives the change. With their airy spreads of small blooms, they are perfect surrogates for the recently deceased whom one wishes to praise.

There are various ways to dry hydrangeas. In the water method, they stand in a container and look like other flower arrangements, gradually losing their colour over a year or so, the way memories fade. For this haiku, the method of tying them to string by the stem and hanging them upside down in a shady place was chosen. I think it was because it powerfully suggests the fragile tenuousness of life and the harshness of the shears we all face, dangling

upside down above the abyss. These are flowers that have been sacrificed before their time and delicately posed in preparation for resurrection in a wreath or other floral memorial that will give such solace and consolation as it can.

And Jo McInerney puts the work into context:

I had never read any of the work of Kylan Jones-Huffman until I came on a small collection of his poems and a number of memorial haiku written to mark his death in a back issue of *The Heron's Nest*.

Peggy Willis Lyles's was the lead memorial poem (at least the first published on the page) and I was arrested by it. Memorial haiku pose a particular challenge. They are poems of context, a little like haiku within a haibun. They have to be able to stand alone and yet also say something that relates meaningfully to the person whose death they acknowledge. Lyles's poem works on both levels.

'dark afternoon' sets the tone. It is sombre, but there is also a note of foreboding. The darkness is premature. It is not yet evening, so the reader presumes either a storm is coming or days are shortening with the approach of winter. There is a loss of light; a truncation of the day. In the context of a memorial poem this is poignantly apt; in the context of Jones-Huffman's life it is particularly so as he was 31 when he died and was killed while on military service in Iraq.

Given the circumstances of Jones-Huffman's life and death, Lyles has chosen an unexpected focus. Hers is a poem of domesticity. She writes of flowers — 'hydrangeas drying'. They are losing moisture, drying in the heat or perhaps being deliberately dried to preserve them. Line three confirms this second option. The images come together to form a distressingly coherent whole. The flowers are fading, their blue-purple heads dulling, darkening, like gathering storm clouds.

Line three is remarkable. On the one hand it is no more than a simple description of a common practice — flowers are hung upside down to dry. On another level it is a complete inversion of the natural order. A small world has been turned upside down. Any death marks such devastation for

those who have lost someone they loved. The haiku acknowledges this grief. It is also a poem of remembrance. Drying is an act of preservation. There is no pretense here that remembrance is resurrection; however, it is a form of extended existence in the minds of those who retain memories of the man who is no longer among them.

The restraint of this haiku sets it apart. There is nothing vainglorious or over-reaching about it. It does not involve itself with questions of politics or patriotism. It simply acknowledges the impact of love and loss.

Finally, Cherie Hunter Day responds from an intimate awareness of the circumstance:

This haiku is immediately accessible for me. Drying flowers and herbs was something that my mom and I did when I was a teenager. We gathered wild seaside lavender and its garden cousin statice along with homegrown comfrey and peppermint. Handfuls were bundled and hung upside down near the wood stove to dry quickly and preserve the herb's medicinal qualities and beauty of the flowers. Hydrangea is dried in much the same way. Their showy, papery translucent petals dry easily and can last many years. I imagine Peggy's hydrangea to be a medium shade of blue with a few pale blue and green blossoms around the edges.

What darkens Peggy's afternoon? Is it the hot Georgia air heavy with moisture, as dark anvil clouds threaten rain? If so, then it doubles the urgency of gathering those hydrangea before they are soaked and ruined. But the task is completed and the flowers are slowly drying—suspended between life and death. Here is where the haiku pivots from the private moment to public expression. There is something else that darkens the afternoon, something more devastating than rain. War news.

Kylan Jones-Huffman was a U.S. Navy Lieutenant serving in Operation: Iraqi Freedom. A soldier and a haiku poet, he was killed in action on August 21, 2003 in Al Hillah, Iraq, when he was only 31 years old. He sent the following haiku to *The Heron's Nest* three days prior to his death.

uncomfortable —
body armor shifting
on the car seat
— Kylan Jones-Huffman

I don't know exactly how Peggy got the news but her shock is palpable. Her tribute haiku captures so much of the ominous nature of that dark afternoon, the immediate discomfort and the need to preserve beauty in this topsy-turvy life.

Peggy was particularly sensitive to the ephemeral nature of things telegraphed through everyday circumstances. Her work is accessible and inclusive, universal and timeless. We thank her for capturing this vulnerable moment.

As this week's winner, Cherie gets to choose next week's poem.

REVIRALS 38

evening loon call —
nothing makes it
call again

— Gary Hotham (*Mainichi Daily News Contest, 2002*)

ayaz daryl nielsen responds to the subject of this haiku as we nearly all do:

loons, you gotta love 'em — their name, physical appearance, melodic and almost mystical voices across our waterways and heartlands, haiku/senryu before the words are even written.

And Peter Newton takes this deeper:

This poem speaks to the primordial nature of the loon's haunting call. Here long before us and here long after we're gone. I appreciate Hotham's sense of humanity in the margins, as witness to the wild. Despite our dominance in the pecking order there are moments when all we can do is absorb the scene. Its sounds and silences. We are not capable of communicating in a meaningful way with loons. "Nothing makes it / call again" which is to say something we will never fully know. Also there's a tone of longing in the third line. A hidden wish each of us may have experienced : "call again" "call again".

Scott Mason calls out the Bard on the theme:

"Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again." So responded Lear to daughter Cordelia when divvying up his kingdom. But Lear proved a fool (or less than a fool: 1.4.185-186) in this and other matters. Greek and Roman philosophers and a certain fictional English monarch notwithstanding, nothingness can be highly generative — not least for haiku poets.

Gary Hotham's fine haiku shows one way how. Here nothingness is ladled out in two helpings: in the absence of light (it's evening) and the absence of

sound (just after the call in L1). This nothingness fills instantly with mystery and wonder. What a satisfying repast!

The mystery pivots in part on whether “nothing” (L2) makes the loon “call again” (L3) . . . or not. Is this the nothing “that is not there” or the nothing “that is”?

We’re only left to wonder. But speak: what more could we want than that?

While Jo McInerney investigates the sources of our ongoing fascination:

Gary Hotham’s haiku begins with a disembodied sound. Long vowels and the repeated ‘I’s suggest the loon’s cry. Semantically, as well as auditorily, ‘call’ is a better choice than ‘cry’. It implies the bird is not just making itself known to whoever might be listening but is seeking a response.

A loon cries to mark territory or to call to a mate. Loons are less vocal in winter as the hormone levels that prompt their cries are lower. It is tempting to hear the line one sound as either a mating call or the bird’s plangent cry for its established partner to return. The poem ends in silence. ‘nothing makes it/call again’. Loons respond to one another; therefore, a summons is usually answered until the two birds are together. It seems the bird has succeeded in attracting its mate. The silence here is filled with a sense of achieved union or reunion.

Yet there is a mood of disappointed expectation, almost of loss. This feeling is the reader’s. It is the human listener who wants to hear the call again.

Loons are waterbirds. They come on shore only to mate and nest. With legs adapted for swimming, they are awkward on land. The name ‘loon’ derives from the Shetland Islands’ ‘loom’, which in turn comes from the Icelandic ‘lomr’ and the Swedish ‘lom’, both referring to someone who is clumsy or lame. They are denizens only of large lakes and waterways. Though strong in flight, their short wings mean they need a long take-off — up to 400 metres or a quarter of a mile — something only a large body of water can provide.

Thus loons live outside the usual human element. They are birds we are far more likely to hear than see. Hotham’s loon is not sighted but heard. It is ‘evening’ and it appears the bird is on the darkening water.

Hotham’s haiku suggests the existential divide between human beings and

the other creatures with which we occupy this planet. It also suggests the yearning we have for connection. The bird's plaintive cry becomes our own. Line three finally seems not so much part of a statement as a plea, 'speak again,' uttered as we stand alone on the water's edge.

The haiku contains another distressing possibility. The loon may be silent because its initial call received no response from another bird. It may be the sole member of its species on this stretch of water. '[N]othing makes it/call again' takes on a disturbing finality.

Currently, the loon is listed as threatened in Michigan and New Hampshire, was declared endangered by the state of Vermont in 1987 and is a federally-protected species in Canada. With the threat of extinction hanging over so many species, this haiku takes on a particular urgency. The prospects are grim as the silence is unrelenting and unbroken.

As this week's winner, Jo gets to choose next week's poem.

REVIRALS 30

on wet sand
the crab's skeleton
reaches out to sea

— Ron C. Moss (from “Last Visit”, 2002)

Marion Clarke wonders:

A watery version of ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’, perhaps?

Which Jo McInerney recognizes and illustrates in detail:

Ron Moss’s haiku appears to suggest a yearning for life, some dead thing reaching out toward life in abundance, toward the ocean, the origin of all life on this planet. On the face of it, the poem has the poignancy of futility. The crab’s exoskeleton seems unknowingly to enact the longing every human being aware of mortality feels at some time, the desire to live beyond our limits.

The haiku comes from an illustrated haibun, ‘The Last Visit’. The poet is living through the last days of a loved friend. This haiku comes at a point in the haibun where the friend is on the point of death and Moss visits his ‘favourite place’. The dying man’s presence is everywhere. The poet’s awareness of imminent loss colours everything he sees, turning the landscape into symbols of life and dying. Though there are ‘flowering gum trees’, the ‘cool sea breeze’ seems like his friend’s departing spirit, his final breath.

The walk along the beach reveals the shell of a crab. There is no imposed anthropomorphism. The curled claws are fixed in a begging gesture, a hooked reaching; the sand is wet and beyond is the sea. The effect is so different from the plea Eliot gives Prufrock: ‘I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas’. Prufrock’s crab is not even named as such. The disembodied, dismembered creature represents a longing for annihilation, for release from self-awareness. Moss’s crab skeleton becomes an embodiment of immortality.

Crabs shed their exoskeletons. This clawed carapace left on the sand is not the remains of a dead crustacean. In all probability, the crab still lives in the water toward which its shell appears to reach. As such it becomes a moving representation of humanity's persistent if uncertain belief in life after death. The human body may be no more than a husk, the mortal remains that once held a spirit which lives on elsewhere. There is a strange comfort in the image.

As this week's winner, Jo gets to choose next week's poem.

REVIRALS 40

Harusame ya hachi no su tsutou yane no mori
spring rain —
dripping down the wasp's nest
from the leaking roof

— Basho (tr. David Landis Barnhill), *Basho Haiku — Selected haiku of Matsuo Basho* (2004)

Jo McInerney appreciates the objectivity of Basho's approach:

Basho's 'spring rain' presents a moment of detachment, one balanced between indifference and acceptance.

The opening kigo is one of promise and life. Spring rain falls on warming earth. It stirs dormant bulbs and drips from swelling buds. However, such expectations are not so much inverted as firmly displaced in the rest of the haiku.

The rain falls on the shelters of humans and insects alike. The human shelter, at least, is inadequate, as the roof is leaking. Wasps water-proof their nests and this one is probably unaffected by the rain; however, it has its place in a chain of human discomfort. It acts as a conduit; the rain enters through the leaking roof before runnelling down the wasp nest and dripping to the floor. There is a delicate interplay of unfulfilled expectations here. If the wasps anticipated additional protection from building under the roofline they have been disappointed. Human expectations of shelter have been doubly unmet. The roof is leaking and there are wasps under it. There is the potential to interpret this compounded misery as humorous; however, the haiku will not sustain this reading. Its tone is neutral, not deadpan.

The simple objectivity adopted within this haiku is interesting. There is no trace of authorial intrusion, not because Basho never overtly suggests an interested perspective, but because he has not done so here. The wasps are neither offered nor denied sympathy. The poet carefully observes the rain and its course down the wasp nest but he does not complain about the drips. Observation is all.

The reader is left to wonder why the roof has not been repaired and why the wasp nest remains beneath it. Perhaps this is the first heavy downpour of the season; perhaps the wasp nest has been previously unnoticed. Perhaps. The first possible explanation, at least, seems unlikely, as this is spring, not autumn rain.

The overall effect is of a human life in stasis. Someone, however briefly, is sitting like a watching stone. However, that is not the final effect. What this haiku seems to suggest, above all else, is the limitations of human agency and the extent to which all living things are at the disposal of larger forces.

As this week's winner, Jo gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 41

retracing my steps
the bread crumbs
of her parting words

— Bob Lucky (*Frogpond* 37.3, 2014)

Jo McInerney follows the poet's trail:

Bob Lucky's 'retracing my steps' is a beautiful piece of shape-shifting in which juxtaposed images act as implied metaphors and then become frankly figurative.

Line one is a physical description with an allegorical undertow. N's recovering of old ground seems both literal and metaphoric. The reader imagines him going back over his previous path, finding his way by following the impressions of his earlier steps. However, the line also has a symbolic dimension, with the speaker able to be imagined as reconsidering his former actions, perhaps remembering words he has spoken.

Whether literal or figurative, the question remains, 'Why this going back over the past?' It seems likely that N is not satisfied with his former course of action. Possibly, subsequent developments have not been what he hoped and he is left trying to determine the cause. Is he responsible for where he now finds himself? Is he trying to return to the point at which things began to go awry and make amends or seek to change what has since occurred?

Line two draws out these possibilities. '[B]read crumbs' is an evocative image. Despite the specificity of 'bread', these crumbled remains also seem partly metaphoric, suggesting the meagre remnants of former plenty. Together with line one, they also seem an allusion to 'Hansel and Gretel', the folktale in which a young boy strew breadcrumbs to lead him back to his home. The story is a devastating one of innocence betrayed by a hostile stepmother and a weak father who leave their two children to die.

With line three, the haiku becomes overt metaphor. The crumbs are the parting words of another. The echo of the folktale reinforces the suggestion of lost love and desertion; though the reference to breadcrumbs is now more

problematic. Are they intended as a spore, a scat, something N can follow back to the unnamed woman who spoke them? Or are they something carelessly thrown away, a parting gesture more dismissive than tantalising? There is no way of knowing. However, with re-reading, N's reliving of this final leave-taking increases in emotional impact. His partial self-recrimination, flickering hope and sense of abandonment achieve a growing resonance with the reader.

As this week's winner, Jo gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 42

home alone
I enter the crawl space
of a younger self

— Robert Epstein (*The Heron's Nest* XVII:2, 2015)

Marion Clarke lays out the terms of engagement:

The first line places the narrator in his domestic environment. There is no reason to consider that there is a problem, but for a certain generation — myself included — it is difficult not to recall the movie of this title and imagine a little boy who has been left behind accidentally in the family home. The second line introduces a sense of menace. Why is the child going to hide in the crawl space? Is he in imminent danger? The use of the verb 'enter' reinforces the small stature of the narrator, as it makes the crawl space feel positively cavernous.

When the reader arrives at line three and discovers it is a figurative crawl space rather than a physical location, for a second there is relief that this not actually happening. But then comes the creeping realisation that this is a memory, so the narrator must have experienced such fear on at least one occasion. Perhaps it was his parents' raised voices during an argument that caused him to run and hide . . . or perhaps he was in real physical danger. The haiku is sufficiently open, thereby inviting the reader to draw upon their own childhood fears to complete the poem. Very effective.

And Jo McInerney consider this self-imposed confinement a bit further:

Possible allusions are sometimes a burden, sometimes a boon. Epstein's 'home alone' demonstrates both these potentials.

Line one is initially weakened by the almost inevitable echo of the 1990 movie juggernaut and its sequels bearing these two words as their title. The films' enormous popularity has made the phrase a modern cliché. However, if the reader can move beyond these associations, the opening line has much

to offer. It takes us in a number of directions. There is a partial paradox as home is usually associated with family and friends. It is not simply a place where one feels comfortable, but a social setting shared with intimate others. Line one implies isolation. If it read 'at home alone', there would be a clearer suggestion of deliberate, perhaps enjoyed, seclusion. As written, the implications are less definite. This aloneness may be a matter of choice; however, it seems more likely it is not.

Line two is startling, both literally and metaphorically. Within a house, a crawl space is generally a shallow basement, a cavity so low that it is impossible to stand up within it. Crawl spaces are often found in dwellings built in areas with very cold winters as they are dug so that the foundations are below the frost line and there is less structural strain from seasonal contraction and expansion. Those living in warm regions are less likely to be familiar with crawl spaces. For some, the term may provoke memories of Sylvia Plath's *A Bell Jar*. Plath's

protagonist hides in a basement crawl space during a suicide attempt (as had Plath herself). There are suggestions here of a spiritual hard winter, of a soul seeking to last out a time of dearth; perhaps, as Plath writes in "Lady Lazarus", 'not come back at all'.

The mood shifts with line three and the poem acquires an even more metaphysical dimension. The crawl space to be entered is that 'of a younger self'. Again the implications are less than certain. Is it that N is recalling a previous time of fear and isolation? To be 'home alone' is probably most distressing for a child. Is N experiencing a recurrence of a previous depression? For readers who catch an allusion to Plath's life and work the implications are concerning. Or is N simply withdrawing into a previous retreat, perhaps even a place of comfort, concrete or imagined? Our questions are left unresolved.

By the end of the haiku, Epstein has completely transcended any trite associations which line one may have carried for some readers and has created a poem which is evocative and unsettling.

As this week's winner, Jo gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 43

super 8 my father nothing but electrons

— Jim Kacian (*Long After*, Albalibri Editore, Rosignano Marittimo, Italy, 2008)

Peter Newton finds a world of big fins here:

The power of the automobile to symbolize strength, style and class was the major marketing tool in the heyday of the auto industry (USA). A super 8 was one of the biggest and best as far as those three criteria go. In this one-liner the poet has put his words to the test. All about speed. And in 7 words we have the life and death of a man. At the start he's bombin' down the road in his super 8. By the end of the poem he's in the ether. All life forms returned to particles of energy. Dust to dust except in this case the focus is on the father at the height of his power in a super 8 (in life) and a few words later his power diminishes when he transforms into "nothing but electrons" (upon death). But power is power. One man's super 8 is another man's electron. There's a subtle commentary going on here. The "nothing but" suggests that electrons were all he (& we) ever were. Of course, that's a perspective only available to a grown son perhaps which gives the poem its heart and sorrow.

Meanwhile, both Jo McInerney and Garry Eaton discover cosmic implications here. Jo parses carefully its constituents:

Jim Kacian's 'super 8' is a moving treatment of memory, love and loss that teases the reader with questions of what remains after death.

The one-liner opens with a reference to a popular form of home movie film stock released by Kodak in the mid sixties. For those who remember this, there is an immediate tug of nostalgia. Memories are triggered of parents and siblings, birthdays, holidays, childhood games. Flickering, sometimes halting images of a world of love and security. For some, the opening two words may also suggest something in addition to home movies. There are

faint echoes of the superheroes of a sixties' childhood — the exaggerated fighting figures from comics and dauntless boys and girls from children's adventure stories. This note of youthful idealisation carries into what is to follow.

The next two words are powerfully personal and immediate. The frame comes into focus. N is watching images of his father. There is a tone of hushed acknowledgement, almost surprised recognition, as though after long absence his father has materialised as he was years before. The words are almost a prayer, spoken to the figure on the screen and to the vitalised memory of the man he was.

After the contemplative pause that follows 'father', forced by the lack of a verb, the mood changes again. Under the cold scrutiny of current reality, who, what is this father? The initial statement is a shocking 'nothing' and then, a partial reprieve, 'nothing but . . .' The reader is shaken and expectant. The final answer? '[E]lectrons'. The reader may be briefly bewildered. Electrons? Gradual understanding follows. No more than the image projected on the screen, powered by electricity, a flow of electrons. Reader response is likely to be empathy for N's grief. This father is dead. His image only an illusion, light playing on a wall.

Yet this is not merely an external image. It lives in the mind of the son, in the mind of the reader, who is likely also to have known a father. It exists in the neural mesh of memory, in pathways along which electrons make their way, carrying and creating life present and past. However, the tracking does not end there.

Finally, the reader is left to speculate about where else the father might be. Twenty-one grams; that small, vital essence that separates the living from the dead. The galvanising electrical impulse that appears fundamental to life. As the reader considers the significance of this haiku's last word, 'electrons' may well seem a physicist's term for the soul, the location of which can only be something about which to wonder.

Garry finds much the same primary reading, and then explores its cosmological implications:

Supperate — 1. adjective-archaic — overcome; surmounted; surpassed

On a simple level, this one-line haiku describes the viewing of a home movie made with the iconic Super 8 movie camera and 8mm film, products marketed by Kodak to home movie makers in the super square '50s, when Jim Kacian was still in his boyhood. With the advents of the invasive portable video camera, the social turbulence of the '60s and '70s and the revolution in home infotainment started by television, these products have become associated nostalgically with a simpler era in America, and in the West, generally. The poet has grown up since the home movie was made and when he feels the sentimental impulse to view it sometime after his father's death and thereby reconnect with that aspect of his past, the experience launches him into the poetic realization that not only has the living, moving being representing itself on the screen as his father long since passed into other, more elementary states of being, but the past moments recreated by the images on the screen have also morphed into something else, and represent to him now, in the midst of overwhelming change, just how unrecoverable the past really is.

On a deeper level, I am reminded of how ingeniously the poets of earlier times, when speaking of creation and destruction, evoked ambiguous images of dust or clay as both mortal remains and God's building blocks. Kacian has moved this into the modern, scientific era with his use of 'electrons' in place of dust or clay, with the result that, for me at least, the creator or guiding hand, traditionally symbolized by the father, has been supplanted with 'life force,' 'energy,' 'amoral evolutionary creativity,' what you will. Such deep depersonalization of experience seems fundamental to the best haiku.

Finally, Paul Miller overcomes some initial skepticism about the poem, and finds a clinching element:

In a number of places Jim Kacian has discussed English-language haiku's need to embrace modernity, most recently arguing that "Contemporary haiku must be able to account for equity derivatives, mass killing at a distance, the purchase of political power within a democracy, the discovery of the Higgs boson, internet dating and much much more..." (Modern Haiku 47.2). This

poem is a prime example of this kind of embrace.

My initial take on the poem was that it presented a clever conceit and nothing more. In fact this is a fault I often find with much modern haiku, where novelty, style, or intent is sometimes valued more than the haiku's effectiveness. Using a twenty-five cent word when a five cent word will suffice, for example.

As most people know, "super 8" is a kind of film (8mm) that was especially prevalent in the 1960s and 70s and often associated with home movies of that period. So I read this poem as Kacian's realization that the film stock his father's image was captured on was made up of electrons; and perhaps by extension that his father wasn't as tangible as he initially perceived. A clever idea but not a lot of room for further exploration by the reader.

But upon reflection I realized that Kacian didn't start the poem with the words "home movies" or "video blog" but rather with the time-specific "super 8." That phrase sets up a nice contrast of how Kacian may have seen his father in the 1960s/70s compared to how he came to see him in later years. I know for myself, as a child, I used to see my parents as all-knowing, having everything in control — "super," if you will. As I became the age they were when they were parents I realized that that was all an illusion. They must have had the same doubts and insecurities I had. Ultimately, this is a poem about perception, and how those perceptions change over time.

Lastly, I like the pun in which the film stock "8 my father" . . . which with Kacian's new perspective is undoubtedly true.

As this week's winner, Paul gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 44

drought year in portrait or landscape

— Cherie Hunter Day (*Modern Haiku* 47.1, 2016)

Our correspondents all took this haunting poem home. Jo McNerney brings it to suburbia:

The six words in Day's haiku demand careful re-examination, showing wider and deeper implications with each reading and disrupting the easy assumptions of a technologically preoccupied age.

'[D]rought year' at its simplest is one in which a drought is experienced. There are technical definitions of 'drought'. In Australia we have three — appropriate for a dry continent; however, I suspect our categories are applied elsewhere. A drought can be 'a prolonged period of below-average precipitation'; 'a period during which water reserves fall below the statistical average' or 'a period where there is insufficient moisture for crop production'. The first definition seems a cause, the last two effects. Day's haiku leads the reader into consideration of all of them.

On first reading 'in portrait or landscape' is likely to suggest the layout options supplied by a word-processing program, a publishing program or a professional photographer. A vertical or horizontal format. Thus the haiku suggests a couple of ways of viewing this 'drought year'. However, there is more at issue than just the way we hold the picture.

Before it was used to suggest simply a vertical format, 'portrait' meant a representation of one or more faces. The haiku implies the personal cost of a 'drought year'. What can we see in the face of someone who has endured a year of drought? Are the lines deeper and accentuated by dust? Has the skin dried? Are eyes narrowed to protect from the sun and strained from looking for cloud? Behind the bland surface of Day's haiku are images like the iconic photographs of Dust Bowl farmers in the 1930s United States, the misery of their lives worn into the fibre of their beings.

And behind the figures of suffering men and women is the land they stand on; 'landscape' from which most either cannot or will not escape. The

horizontal format suggests the scope of the desolation. Dry fields reaching to the horizon; blown soil carried on the wind; the flat, cracked bottoms of empty dams.

Many of us live in ordered, suburban worlds where 'drought year' means relatively little. Day's haiku gives us frames within which to place a more fundamental reality.

And Kathe L. Palka to some of the threatened landscapes surrounding it:

Reading Cherie Hunter Day's fine monoku I was immediately reminded of a photo series I recently viewed on Lake Poopó located in the Altiplano Mountains of Bolivia. Lake Poopó has long been vulnerable to the vagaries of weather due to its location and has recently dried up again. However, many fear it will not return this time but remain dry, a victim, in part, of climate change. The rains may never sufficiently return. The photo series included sweeping landscape vistas of the dry lakebed ringed by arid mountains as well as portraits of the local people and their empty landlocked boats photographed against the backdrop of the cracked lakebed. The disappearance of Lake Poopó has caused the displacement of many villagers who lived lakeside and once made their livelihood by fishing its saline waters. In addition to the loss of aquatic life dozens of local bird species such as the flamingo have been impacted by the lake's disappearance.

A drought year can transform the geography of a region, dramatically changing lakes, ponds, streams, wetlands, rivers, plains and the lives of the animals, peoples and all biologic diversity that resides there. Changing both the overall landscape and all that exists therein. This brief monoku by Cherie Hunter Day asks the reader to imagine both the big picture and the details/more intimate portraits of a drought year. Using the language of photography it asks what print view/orientation the image taker/reader would prefer and in so doing asks that we imagine both. In photography as in haiku, narrowing the focus, or zeroing in on a detail of the bigger picture often creates a more powerful image. Each reader will imagine their own.

As this week's winner, Kathe gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 45

cowlick
some part of me
still wild

— Annette Makino (*tinywords* 13.2, 2013)

This neat piece of self-reflection lightened the day for Marion Clarke:

This haiku is one of those that really makes me smile. Right after reading, I remembered I'd commented on it on *tinywords* at the time. I said it was cute . . . And struck a spark of recognition with Peter Newton: The uncontrolled and uncontrollable element of ourselves that we carry with us throughout our lives. Sometimes they are outgrown — as cowlicks are on occasion. But not always. This poem seems to suggest a gratitude for the unnameable wildness that endures.

As well as Mary Stevens:

My mother used to say my hair had a will of its own. When I told a hairdresser years later, she asked if my mother meant my hair or me. My mother even used the new Detangler — that unrelenting, mechanized brush yanking at my hair. So much of our upbringing is to become “presentable” to society. We become enculturated into appropriate behavior, language, mannerisms. The first-noticed piece of that is correct grooming, particularly the hair. The speaker of this poem has a cowlick — not a straight part in the right place but a whorl in the wrong place. Makino's use of the word “part,” here, is truly clever. “Cowlick” is also a great word. I imagine curling up with a cow (and isn't being close to nature one of those things frowned upon by the civilized?). She grooms you as her young. Her big tongue gives your head a good going over in large, circular licks. She's concerned with general cleanliness and

is possibly expressing affection. The cow mother doesn't even notice the tangles.

And Jo McInerney explores its linguistic and human origins:

Most human beings are poets. The common names given common things often show wit, feeling and remarkable sharp-sightedness. Part of the delight of Makino's haiku comes from being forced to recognise that a word whose impact has been blunted by use can have its intrinsic spark reignited.

The haiku opens with 'cowlick', an unruly lock of hair that will not be plastered down, no matter what the wearer tries. Its metaphorical implications are spelt out in the next two lines. It represents all those idiosyncrasies that we try or are required to suppress. The wildness in L3 is attractively open. Is this the wildness of a child, his loose curl falling forward into his eyes as he plays, or the wildness of a rocker from the 50s and 60s with his dark Elvis locks sweeping seductively from his brooding brow?

The haiku suggests the animal in us all. L1 is a reminder of the power of language to hold onto the origins of an accepted term. 'Cowlick' derives from cows' habit of licking their young, which results in a swirling pattern in the hair. Much of human behaviour too is based on instinct whose rebellious roots rise from our DNA.

Makino hints at those aspects of ourselves, often most freely revealed when young, that we have since had to rein in and shows their encouraging persistence. Despite our best (or worst) efforts, those quirks of eccentricity that were born in us refuse to be restrained.

As this week's winner, Jo gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 46

mosquito
a stranger's blood
on my hand

— Quendryth Young (Wollumbin Haiku Workshop NSW,
2007)

Jo McInerney parses this intimate moment with her usual depth:

Quendryth Young's haiku performs a deft balancing act, maintaining a delicate poise between humour and insight.

Line one gives the reader the sudden presence of the insect. Perhaps N is alerted by the whine; more likely by the bite, because lines two and three take us swiftly to the probable site of injury and retribution. The bite is not described; its consequences are — the smear of blood on a human hand from the squashed body of the small bloodsucker.

There may be a moment's puzzlement. Why 'a stranger's blood'? Surely the blood is N's own; but apparently not. No, the insect has been despatched before it has bitten, just at the moment of its alighting on its next victim's skin. The smeared blood is that of the last person whom it feed from — 'a stranger'.

Another double take as the reader recognises the usual context in which someone is said to have blood on his or her hands. This is normally a metaphor for guilt, where Lady Macbeth-like, the bloodied one laments the (sometimes literally murderous) action he or she has performed. A joke, surely? Yes, in part. N has not killed the stranger whose blood has been left behind; just the little bleeder that was trying to take more. We smile, recognising the disproportion between the serious phrase and the trivial event.

Then we pause again. Yes, the life taken is only that of an annoying insect. Yet that blood was far more important to the tiny creature than it was to the person from whom it was drawn. Only female mosquitoes take blood. They use the protein and iron found in blood to make their eggs. More generally

they feed on nectar and water, as male mosquitoes do exclusively. And how much do they take? Three milligrams or three millionths of a litre. A minute enough amount to be donated without being missed. And the itch? A mild (for most) allergic reaction to the mosquito's saliva.

Perhaps as we pause to consider the small life lost we feel a twinge of sympathy and even regret for the many such lives we are likely to have taken. Young has moved us into Issa's territory.

Don't kill that fly!
Look — it's wringing its hands,
wringing its feet.

And she has done so apparently effortlessly, with no obvious injunction, and with an admixture of humour.

All this is implicit in Nathan Sidney's response:

Disgust, regret, an unexpected moment of intimacy. The mingling of blood usually happens through conception, a mingling of bloodlines. Here it's discovered that our boundaries aren't as solid as we would like. In one reading the stranger's blood is the act of murdering the mosquito as in "I have blood on my hands". In another reading it is the recognition that this mosquito is a spreader of disease, a parasite that steals and infects. The ambiguity of the poem reflects the ambiguity of the act of killing the mosquito, unthinkingly swatted, then the small pang of guilt. On an impulse, a life is taken. The word stranger implies that maybe the mosquito could have been a friend. Here the possibility of friendship is not only missed but silently crushed. And there is also the knowledge that this stranger, whose blood is on the hajjin's hand, is made of the same stuff, is flesh. Here we are all linked by vital fluids, by the suddenness of death, perhaps not such strangers after all.

As this week's winner, Nathan gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 47

gossamer the length of a dream

— Shloka Shankar (A Hundred Gourds 5:1, 2015)

Marion Clarke connects with the poem directly:

Shloka's monoku shimmers with an ethereal quality. It could really only work as written, since cutting it into three lines would lose its length and, thus, concrete quality.

Q: How do we measure the length of a dream? A: We can't — it's as elusive as this thread of gossamer that the narrator is reaching for as it floats past. It's difficult to tell where it begins and ends.

But this fine spider silk is also very strong. Despite its delicate appearance, it has real substance. Just like sometimes when we wake up from a particularly vivid dream, some elements stay with us and for a moment we don't know what is real. Who hasn't awakened from a beautiful dream of a loved one to suddenly realize that this person is no longer with us? The 'resurrected' grief can sometimes be as real as the moment we were told they had gone.

And Jo McInerney takes us into the poem by exploring the origins of its key word:

'Gossamer' — literally a spider's thread — has meanings beyond the literal. It drifts and shines as any filmy substance of attenuated beauty.

It is the stuff of paradox — fragile loveliness and tensile strength; infinite fineness and infinite length. Shloka Shankar takes this shimmering thread and uses it as a unit of measurement to plumb a dream. How long is a dream? Like a piece of string, it is the length it is; flickering brevity or the deep, slow sleep of eternity.

Shankar's monoku is like an autumn lane strung with spider silk. The word 'gossamer' derives from 'gos' or 'goose summer', the period of late autumn when geese are plentiful; a time of short-lived warmth before the rigours of winter; what was once referred to in Scottish as 'go-summer'. 'Gossamer' specifically is spider thread found in fields of stubble in late fall, as it appears

the word for the time of year has been transferred to something noticeable then.

What ultimately remains is the sense of fragility. The sense that the dreamer will awaken and the dream will end, the thread will snap. Autumn's last warm respite will give way to the cold.

Finally, Pratima Balabhadrapathruni invokes other poetic instances to heighten the effect:

A very deep write.

The “er” in “gossamer” creates the pause before gliding across. The rest of the haiku sounds like a dreamy sigh. Which is how a pleasant dream would be . . . a “gossamer of happiness” (Charlotte Bronte), a delicate, intricate web of silk skein. Almost unreachable, almost reachable, and yet beyond, a little further away. When the wind blows through this web, it balloons. Exactly the way dreams do, when we attach emotions to them. Little details emerge, blurring reality. Blurring fantasy.

I read the haiku as an extended metaphor for interdependence, an instance for team work.

Whitman in “A Noiseless Silent Spider” wrote:

Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.”

How drawn out is, the gossamer of our dreams. Who is being bridge, anchor . . . where and when does the “I” begin and end . . .

As this week's winner, Pratima gets to choose next week's poem.

REVIRALS 48

A blue anchor grains of grit in a tall sky sewing
— John Ashbery (*Sulphur* 5, 1981)

Perhaps not surprisingly, no one took up the challenge of this difficult poem. As a consequence I have chosen this next week's poem, with hope that it strikes home to more of you.

REVIRALS 40

My haplogroup
shows the sponge gene
distant lightning

— Robert Mainone (*Modern Haiku* 40.3, 2009)

Patrick Sweeney circles this beautiful poem in his characteristic fashion:

I'm not certain if Pascal said, "If it isn't easy, it's impossible." I mean, he said so many things, he might have said it. I know for sure LeBron James said, "Basketball isn't easy." So there is a myth about haiku, a powerful myth that is unpopular to disagree with, that the haiku should be simple, easy. Basho is not easy. Mr. Mainone's haiku is epistemological. A fella has to dig into it and discover what a "haplogroup" is, what role the "sponge gene" plays in a person's medical history . . . and then, the last line is loaded with foreboding and beauty. A haiku like this one doesn't stop on the page. The reader, and I mean "reader" in the George Steiner sense of the word, will go off on his own little search for meaning. I know this is not an explication, but why spoil the fun?

Cherie Hunter Day:

This haiku is definitely a deep stretch into molecular genetics. Mainone starts with haplogroups, which trace the genomic genealogy of DNA. By looking at specific markers scientists can analyze the genetic ancestry of humans distributed around the globe. Thirty years ago the theory focused on a single human progenitor, "mitochondrial Eve," but now it is thought there are 10 to 12 predominant Y-DNA haplogroups in Europe alone. Mainone takes the genetic connections even further back on the evolutionary scale to sponges: humans share nearly 70 percent of their genetic make-up with sea sponges. All life on Earth is connected, and each nucleus of every cell has a record. With "distant lightning" in the third line the connection is taken back to the origin of life. Some readers might recall science textbooks that showed a

painting of violent lightning storms over a tumultuous sea as an explanation of how life first evolved from the primordial soup of elements 3.5 billion years ago. Mainone has telescoped all of this human and pre-human history into just seven words. It's a bolt of lightning in a haiku. As a former molecular biologist and geneticist I'm encouraged that haiku is large enough to peek in on such a vast topic.

Nathan Sidney:

A haplogroup is a set of genes inherited from a single parent, so is the parent in this case the sponge, thought to be the ancestor of all animals? Is the distant lightning the primordial spark that set all earthly life in motion? We are invited to think that maybe the poet could soak up the atmosphere without the burden of a discursive mind in the manner that the sponges body literally drinks the world, a sponge being nothing more than an agglomeration of this flow. Can a haiku evolve this way? The flow of genes across time links the poet to a birth in an ancient ocean wracked by storms. The technical term haplogroup and the reference to genes shows that though the past is still very much present, change has occurred over deep time. Transience of a different scale. The sponge has found a voice, and a sophisticated one at that, making us ask is a pure "haiku moment" available to this sophisticated modern mind, can we ever again be as innocent as the sponge? Would we want to be?

Stella Pierides:

Haplogroup, I understand, is the term describing the exact common ancestry, the genetic family tree down to its roots of a group of humans. In this poem's case, the sponge.

At first, identifying with the narrator, I felt hurt to be classified as a sponge; then I reconsidered. After all, I'd read that sponges share a remarkable amount of genetic material with humans — so not to be taken personally. But did I want to be reminded on a Sunday morning, over coffee, that I have a lot in common with sponges?

It is of course science that gives me this information. Is science the bringer of uncomfortable news? Is it the culprit that clips the angel's wings (Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,/ Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,;/ Poe, "To Science")? Or am I shooting the messenger? After all, Dawkins and others before him have argued that, rather than "Unweaving the Rainbow", science reveals the world's hidden beauty.

But here, in this context, it is the poet who reminds me of my humble beginnings. Of course, to their credit, sponges thrived for over 600 million years while I have struggled with fewer than 100. And recent research uncovered clues pointing to sponges descending from a more advanced ancestor than previously thought.

Still, how far am I reducible to bits of genetic information translated into proteins, labellable, traceable, ultimately replaceable? A mere cog in the cosmic machine? I, Stella, poet, writer, and sponge.

Be that as it may, what I find interesting, and welcome, is that the poet feels at ease with bringing a scientific fact into the poem. After all, objective scientific facts are as much part of our world as subjective experiences.

In earlier centuries (and as far back as the ancient Greek thinkers), it had been common practice for poets to describe scientific discoveries in their poems; poets popularised scientific ideas (think of Charles Darwin), and scientists popularised poetry. In the eighteenth century Dickens, and others, went further than mutual facilitation, exploring poetically, for instance, ideas of energy conservation and dissipation (cf. Barri J. Gold, "ThermoPoetics"). Literature and science have been inspiring and influencing each other in Victorian times, and since, as well as competing for access to truth.

In this poem, Robert Mainone's narrator sounds both surprised and humbled at being reminded that he, we, are all branches of the same evolutionary tree, part of the same cosmos. The penny drops. The distant comes closer and light is thrown on the matter — aha! How humbling! How reassuring! We are all one.

Tom Sacramona:

Robert Mainone's "my haplogroup" captures the interconnectedness of

life on Earth and it calls to mind Basho's "goi" poem. While Basho's heron screams out of the darkness, Mainone's sponge matches our genetic material. Mainone's poem also centers on zoka – on creation out of seemingly nothing. For scientists, trying to decode DNA and synthesize its knowledge must feel like creating out of the void. In Mainone's poem, the scientists he alludes to have learned through this very process the DNA code of a sea sponge, and in analyzing its data, they discovered we have something in common. What a shot in the dark! This knowledge of familiarity adds another ancestor to "[his] haplogroup", resonates deeply with Mainone, and figures as his haiku moment. Science has illuminated the "distant" night of humanities' origins and told us that all multi-cellular organisms owe something in their evolutionary history to the sponge.

As this week's winner, Patrick gets to choose next week's poem.

REVIRALS 50

The many notes
of the falling rain,
all in tune.

— Don Wentworth (*tinywords* 12.1, November 2012)

Marion Clarke parses this poem nicely:

It's unusual to see upper case letters and punctuation in haiku and I see this one of Don's was written in 2012, so perhaps that explains it.

When read aloud, this haiku naturally drops at the end of each line, mirroring the action of falling rain. The repetition of sound in 'falling' and 'all in' also has great musicality and rhythm which is vocalised in L3 and comes to rest on the word 'tune'. Here in Ireland where it rains a lot, it's easy to imagine a whole symphony of different sounds as raindrops land on a watering can, patio table, old bucket, etc. I could see the narrator rejoicing at the falling rain, perhaps in an arid area where it has been long awaited. In any case, it is a real celebration of nature – even if he is getting wet!

Ellen Grace Olinger adds:

Wonderful and wise poem by Don Wentworth. My mother's passing was in 2004, and the songs that remain are ones of gratitude, beauty and unconditional love. Each new grief or challenge seems to require its own time.

As this week's winner, Marion gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 51

moving into the sun
the pony takes with him
some mountain shadow

— Jane Reichhold (*American Haiku in Four Seasons*, Yilin Press, Nanjing, China, 1991)

Alan Summers remembered this poem fondly:

This was one of my favourite haiku last century and it was a joy to revisit. This haiku was one of those catalyst poems that pushed me into writing better work. Line by line the gentle pace, and resonance, is picked up in tension as well. Not all haiku work so well with just taking the first line of the poem, and sitting with it, before going onto the next lines: With those first two lines, we are compelled to read the third and last line. But that isn't enough, the construction teases us to read the first line and then the whole poem again, and for me, again and again.

Haiku can be over stuffed if two verbs are employed in something which is often barely a sentence:

Moving into the sun the pony takes with him some mountain shadow. But this para-sentence, if stretched out into a single prose line still contains all those elements that make the haiku so iconic, and would make for a strong line of prose in either a short story, novella, or full novel, whether as the opening line, internal line, or concluding line. How is it that I can read this short poem all over again, and multiple times, and not be bored, not be constrained by just one single meaning or a flat layer of plot? There are cleverly plotted out keywords and key lines such as:

moving
into the sun
takes with him
some
mountain shadow

I remember being absolutely stunned when I read this haiku some time in the 1990s, and that I had to read it many times to understand its intricacy, and then when I had worked it out, I re-read it many many times more for sheer enjoyment.

Not surprisingly this haiku gained a Museum of Haiku Literature award back in 1984.

How can a mere dozen words act so satisfyingly both on the tongue and the mind's "tongue". After all these years I am still intrigued by it, by that opening line, and each successive line. It takes great craft to make so few simple and plain words into an epic, and all condensed into three short lines. I will never tire of reading this haiku again and again, and attempt to move into the sun, taking a little of the mountain's shadow with me.

Peter Newton takes this right up to the present:

There's an element of the wild here. The gradual pace of the poet's observation reflective of the action described. Perhaps this pony is untamed. One of the wild ponies in the herds out west? It may have no reason to fear people. And yet I read into this scene: another day older — into the day's sun — a pony wary of what's ahead carrying with it the wisdom of experience as represented by the "mountain shadow." The scene has the mood of a vast cloud formation as it moves slowly across the landscape. Also, a surreal magical tone as if the dark coloration of "mountain shadow" could imprint on the pony itself. An Appaloosa's dark spots? A literal translation, I realize. A bit of a creation myth here as well. Very cool.

We take with us wherever we go our lived experiences. Our surroundings. I think of Rumi who said: "You become what you love." Clearly, the poet here offers an intimate detail. A person at one with the land and its creatures.

As this week's winner, Peter gets to choose next week's poem.

RE:VIRALS 52

dandelion antsronauts

— Tom Sacramona (bottle rockets 18.1, 2016)

Marion Clarke is entertained:

At first I thought I'd misread this one . . . then I thought it was a tongue twister . . . finally, I saw Daliesque black ants (with large heads) climbing on a yellow flower. Highly amusing!

And Garry Eaton has his doubts:

I am surprised that anyone could construe this as haiku, but will be happy to be shown I'm mistaken.

What I see is ants that have climbed a dandelion gone to seed being carried away on individual seed tufts by the wind, like astronauts returning to earth in tiny re-entry pods. It's an amusing fantasy, and may actually sometimes happen, depending on the physics of the situation (wind speed, lift and the weight of the ant, blah, blah, blah) but it seems to me the "experience" was contrived, a cartoon made for the purpose of creating a "haiku." Too cute.

Can Lynn Edge persuade them otherwise?:

I confess to first reading the second word as astronauts and seeing the fuzz from the dandelion flying in the wind.

On second read, "antsronauts" adds a humorous aspect to the poem. The ants catch a ride on the dandelion fuzz on their way to colonize what for them can be a new world.

How creative to capture an image and an abstract idea in two words. Also, the poet invents a word accessible to readers, and it brings a lightness to the day.

Convinced?

As this week's winner, Lynn gets to choose next week's poem.

END OF YEAR ONE