



REVIRALS

YEAR 3

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 105

This autumn
I'll be looking at the moon
With no child on my knee.

— Onitsura (Translation by Donald Keene. Included in Faubion Bowers' *The Classic Tradition of Haiku: An Anthology*, with the following footnote: "Written on the death of his eldest son at age six, in 1700.")

Lynne Rees is moved by Onitsura's generosity:

Even without the epilogue the idea of losing a child is implicit in the haiku and Onitsura's use of concrete language and direct statement adds an emotional power that I am sure would have been diluted with a more decorative/indirect approach. Autumn, the moon, a child sitting on someone's knee: these are images and events familiar to us all and their ordinariness allows us to connect our own experience to the writer's. And yet their ordinariness is where their power lies; they are rich vehicles for so many ideas.

Autumn is a season of change, of loss, of nature receding. I won't say 'death' as that's a human interpretation of how we witness and experience this period of decay and decline. But for this grieving father autumn and death will be inextricably linked as he remembers his son and perhaps even imagines the even bleaker season of winter, both physical and emotional, to follow. The loss may be too recent to even consider the implicit ideas that spring carries but they are there, at the edge of our consciousness, and there may be some consolation to be taken from them.

An autumn moon tends to be understood as a full moon and that stark white disc in a dark sky manages to both intensify the emotional loss for me and provide me with some comfort because of its natural beauty. It's paradoxical, I know, but there is nothing straightforward about the often conflicting process of grief. The image also reminds me of the lullaby, 'I see the moon, the moon sees me . . .', another heart-rending reminder of having no child to sing to.

The absence of the child is visceral in the third line. We feel it in our bodies as much as we recognise it with our minds and memories: the weight of a child on our lap, the bouncing movement that engenders laughter, intimacy. There is now only 'no child,' and 'my knee' may as well be bone separated from its own flesh.

The use of the future tense is unexpected when we are so used to haiku expressing a moment in the present tense (whether that moment is drawn from the past or immediate experience). But it really does feel like the right choice here, as this is not the experience of a moment, but one that marks our past, present and future.

I find this haiku both deeply moving and generous in the sense that it takes great courage for someone to share their loss with the world. But it is in that sharing and understanding of each other's lives where our humanity lies.

Aparna Pathak talks of lunar longing:

The very first thing that I noticed about the poem is that each line is starting with a word that has letter in capital. It is not very common nowadays to come across a haiku with capitals.

There is no bigger sorrow than the death of one's child. The very thought of a vacant knee gives me goose bumps. The poet is remembering his child whose demise has created a vacuum that can never be filled. The very first line indicates the mood of the poem where he is thinking about the autumn, followed by the moon — the moon that is shining miles and miles away, the moon that can't be reached or touched. But the moon is still better placed as the poet can at least see it, unlike his departed child.

Now the question arises of why the poet is thinking about missing his child in autumn only? Well, the autumn moon is also known as the harvest moon, which is supposed to be the biggest and brightest one. And we miss our loved ones more on festivals and celebrations, don't we?

We all grow up with the stories of becoming a celestial body upon our demise. And we all look up at the sky for our lost ones. Perhaps the poet too has the same idea at the back of his mind.

Fathers usually make their children sit on their knee while talking to them

affectionately. This is the time when a father answers all the queries of his child, in a warm talk where both of them bond affectionately. The poet knows he will be missing his child and the time they spent together. The longing is well depicted.

Editor Danny Blackwell offers some extra background on Onitsura:

Onitsura was a contemporary of Bashō, and is credited as being one of the great creators of haiku. Blyth, for example, said of him: “Onitsura composed the first real haiku.”

Kenneth Yasuda’s book *The Japanese Haiku* includes various quotes from various sources, which will prove valuable in getting to know about the poet at hand. Onitsura himself expressed his thoughts on haiku with the following words:

“When I think occasionally about an excellent verse, I find no artistic touch in its phrasing, or display of colorfulness in its air; only the verse flows out effortlessly; yet profound is the heart that expressed it.”

The Japanese scholar Asō is cited in Yasuda’s book with the following comment:

“Once an abbot asked Onitsura what the essence of haiku art was, and he replied: ‘In front of a garden a camellia tree blooms with white flowers.’ Since the truth of the universe lies even in a single flower, insight into the universe and into God can be grasped by understanding this truth . . . Onitsura thinks that the true way of haiku art is to discover poetic refinement in the truth of natural phenomena, whether in the snow, the moon, or flowers, with a selfless attitude.”

We find this mission statement evident in the poem under discussion: In front of the moon a father’s heart blooms with the loss represented by a childless knee. It is a simple description. Unadorned. Unpoetic even. And yet it resonates because of its sincerity, something Onitsura spoke of at great length, using the Japanese word *makoto*, which we will touch on in a moment. But first I’d like to present two very similar flower poems by Onitsura that speak to the “truth of natural phenomena,” and which I will try my best to translate:

桜咲くころ鳥足二本馬四本
when blossoms bloom
bird feet: two
horse: four

The following haiku is similar, in the way it reveals the almost shocking isness of nature, offering an epiphany in which things-as-they-are become somehow absurdly real, usually by virtue of some natural phenomena which awakes in us a new way of looking at the world, which is little more than looking at the world in its essential nature.

目は横に鼻は竖なり春の花
eyes horizontal, nose vertical: spring blossoms

In the case of these two poems the epiphanies (that birds have 2 feet and horses have 4, or that eyes are of a horizontal nature, while the nose is vertical) are caused by blooming flowers, while in the poem about the loss of his child it would seem the moon has played a part in awakening him to a simple realization. The realization here, however, (that the moon-viewing this autumn is without his son on his knee) inspires far more pathos in the reader, and seems to go beyond the “whimsical humour” that critic Henderson spoke of when discussing Onitsura. Henderson criticized Onitsura’s haiku as being too philosophical, saying that they were more like epigrams than haiku (something we often hear said of many modern English-language haiku), and while that opinion may seem valid to a degree in reference to these two flower poems, I don’t think that criticism would hold with the poem we have been looking at this week.

On a technical note: Lynne made reference in her analysis to the use of future tense in the translation, although the original is more ambiguous about tense and would maybe read more like this:

this autumn
no child on my knee
moon viewing

I'd like to offer one final quote from Asō, also included in Yasuda's book, which we can reflect on as we try to unravel this enigmatic genre known as haiku: a genre that evolved radically through the influence of Onitsura and Bashō and continues to challenge us to this day:

“At the center of Onitsura's haiku theory is his statement about truth. Everywhere in his writing he uses the word makoto. This term is used in various ways and its meaning is not fixed. However, he uses this term in the sense of sincerity. In his writing a Soliloquy, he said, ‘When one composes a verse and exerts his attention only to rhetoric or phraseology, the sincerity is diminished.’

The fact that no artistic effort in the form or no decorative expression in the context [should be present] is Onitsura's ideal, which is the way of sincerity.” Our commentators this week have all remarked on the everyday nature of the elements in this poem that make it so easy to relate to, and of its ability to awake great compassion in us, while at the same time being composed with a lack of poetic decoration.

In Onitsura's own words:

まことの外に俳諧なし

“Without makoto, there would be no haikai.”

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

REVIRALS 106

mosquito wings —
the colour of evening
so thin

— Ajaya Mahala (First Place, Shiki Monthly Kukai, May 2014)

Aparna Pathak discusses dusk, the so-called “time between wolf and dog”:

It seems to be a summer evening when the swarm of mosquitoes start coming out from their hideouts. I have experienced their buzz while taking an evening walk.

Here the translucent wings of the mosquito are seen as the evening that is neither clearly day nor night — the evening that gradually surrenders its sustenance.

The changing colours during dusk make the sky really spectacular, but the poet here is not interested in that. He is rather pensive about the thin line of evening that divides the day from night.

I feel that the poet also refers to the indecisive state of mind where it is difficult to come to a conclusion, as things are not clear enough to distinguish. But with a little wait things automatically become clear, as this thin line is not strong enough to sustain.

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

RE=VIRALS 107

red plums
her steady hand slips
between the bees

— Ferris Gilli (*The Heron's Nest II*: 11, 2000)

Ajaya Mahala talks of intrusion in the natural world:

The haiku is characterized by movement. A human hand moves steadily towards the red plum surrounded by bees. The bees too are in a constant state of alertness and motion. However, there is great contrast between the movement of bees and that of a human hand. The movement of bees is instinctive. They respond instinctively to any kind of intrusion. But the movement of the human hand is a calculated move and can be considered as predatorial. It brings to my mind the steady movement of a snake towards the nest of a bird for the eggs.

Human beings sit on the top of the food pyramid and probably are the biggest predators. Humans are encroachers in the natural world and have to show modesty when their interests come into conflict with that of other members of the animal world. While bees are considered to be a rightful claimant for the wild plums, the steady advance of a human hand is a vivid visual image depicting the sense of criminality in reaching out for the bounty of Nature.

Garry Eaton sees red:

There are many points in its favour, but mainly I would notice the choice of colour for the plums: red instead of blue. Red is the colour of energy, of fire, and of the sun. It is also the colour of those two most contrary currents in our being, desire and fear. Red fruits indicate ripeness, a quality that makes them desirable. But that quality is nicely balanced in the poem under discussion by the wariness and experience, the steadiness in the gesture of the hand reaching for them, hoping with an act of daring to transfer their energy without penalty to itself. The redness of the plums, swollen with goodness,

is desirable. However, these red plums also evoke fear by suggesting sub-verbally how the hand reaching for them might look, red and swollen, after the bees have attacked. Exploiting these aspects of the plums' redness is the result of deliberate word choices by the artist and contributes perfectly to the dynamic tension between fear and desire in the moment being portrayed in the poem.

Vaguely like the hand of a midwife making a delivery? A thief in the orchard? Several possible surrounding contexts that are not directly relevant but that are evoked through connections with very common experiences make this a poem anyone can intuitively understand and identify with.

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

RÉS:VIRALS 108

lisant sous les chênes
un mot quitte la page
. . . une fourmi noire!

reading under the oaks
a word leaves the page
. . . a black ant!

— Damien Gabriels (*Sur la pointe des pieds*, Editions L'Iroli,
2008)

Lynne Rees confesses to bringing her punctuation “baggage” with her:

As readers we bring our own baggage to a text. Our comprehension and our response, both intellectual and emotional, tend to be coloured by our own experience of language and life. And that can be very enriching — although sometimes it isn't.

I suppose that in an ideal world we would be completely objective: we'd approach every text without preconceptions and the interference of previous knowledge and preferred practice. And I am encouraging myself to do that with this haiku because my first response is one of irritation with the exclamation mark. Other readers will be less critical of it, I'm sure. But, for me, I feel as if the writer is directing me to respond in a specific way.

I once asked my 6-year old granddaughter what she thought an exclamation mark meant and she leapt into the air with both hands spread and said: “SURPRISE.” And perhaps the ellipsis contributes to my annoyance? Another ‘flag’ that slows us down ready for the big revelation?

I really do like that second line though: “a word leaves the page” suggests a number of ideas to me. It might be something I really need to hear, or something that has given up trying to persuade. There's loss. But strength too. And I appreciate the comic juxtaposition of realising that my brain is playing a trick: that where I might search for profundity in life there might only be the pragmatic.

Of course, there's no right or wrong with regards to the use of punctuation in haiku. And my opinion is just that: my (very subjective) opinion.

Ajaya Mahala returns to comment of his selection from last week:

The haiku is about those enjoyable distractions. To go near an oak to read a book indicates the innate desire to run away from the monotony of the home, where the mind gets crammed up with thoughts, and gets constructively distracted by the outside ambience.

Since someone is immersed in reading, their eye contact is with the black letters and words. These black letters are mere carriers of ideas that take the reader to the realm of thoughts. A black ant, which might have fallen from the tree onto the page, runs away and affords the reader an opportunity to pause and think, saying: "There are other things to look at."

The brain has to relish every bit of creative substance at a leisurely pace, and distractions of this nature make the process of assimilation easier. The reader can then go back to reading with much more interest.

The same author has written another "distraction" haiku, which is somewhat similar:

réunion de travail —
un petit nuage blanc
passe à la fenêtre

work meeting —
a small white cloud
passes in front of the window
— Damien Gabriels (Marelle de lune, 2008)

In this haiku "a small white cloud" has taken the place of "a black ant." Both these fascinating distractions appear for a short time and depart the scene of serious business quickly.

These haiku remind me of my college days. While writing my examination papers, there would be rain outside on some occasions. I would pause my

pen for a while, and look at the rain outside. This eases tension and makes you reflect on more important stages of life. After all, life is more than writing examination papers!

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

REVIRALS 100

pig and i spring rain

— Marlene Mountain (*Frogpond* 2:3-4, 1979)

Garry Eaton discovers a democratic spirit:

I think it was de Tocqueville who, after seeing how many roving bands of semi-domesticated pigs ran unattended in the city streets of America in the 18th century, remarked that they were a perfect expression of America's come-one come-all, democratic spirit. This poem by Marlene Mountain reminded me of him because by using the non-capitalized personal pronoun "i" she puts herself on a plane with the "pig", and is as free as a pig is to enjoy the rain which falls democratically on all alike. There is something uninhibited in the pig's appreciation of rain that the poet may well share, even if she does not bask, Moonbeam McSwine-like, in the mud. It is the poet's joy to participate in the fructifying seasonal rebirth brought on by the change of weather, and take pleasure in the simple companionship of this uncomplicated animal. Reading it is like breaking through barriers to a free place.

Hansha Teki shares in the epiphany:

When I first read this haiku some years ago, the feeling awakened in me was similar to that which I experienced when I read Gabriel's moment of epiphany in the final paragraph of Joyce's *The Dead*:

"...snow was general all over Ireland (. . .) It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried (. . .) His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."

'pig' is not defined by an article (neither definite nor indefinite) but as being just 'pig' manifestly present. 'i', in like manner, is not defined but is being

manifestly present. The moment's collocation of 'pig' and 'i' is in spring rain, faintly echoing the words of Matthew 5:45:

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

mm's haiku equates neither 'pig' nor 'i' with evil or good, or with just or unjust. For a startling moment of deep humility 'pig' and 'i' are manifestly present with each other in all that spring rain uniquely evokes.

Danny Blackwell wonders if the personal is political:

What a great haiku. It is hard not to feel compassion for the players in the scene. Sadly, it is also hard for me not to think about the pig's destiny, which is likely one of suffering for the benefit of humans. For the most part pigs are not companions, like dogs or cats. Pigs are, more often than not, destined to be food. In fact, unless we work on a farm or in the countryside, we rarely see a living pig. Like many great haiku it is what isn't said — what is implicit — that really resonates with us. The pig in this haiku will probably end up on someone's plate, and one has to reflect on what that means. Upon reading this poem by Marlene Mountain I cannot help but recall an interview that I read not long ago, and which colours my reactions. While not a vegan myself, I recently stumbled across a pamphlet of resistance against speciesism, and I was particularly captivated by the opening interview with an individual named Rob, who served in the military during Desert Storm:

“I was out of the military for some time already, and I was struggling with PTSD (...) you see, when I was in the military I saw the most horrible and ugliest things, I saw innocent people die, and I saw these videos of animals, and noticed there was no difference in how humans and animals die, there was no difference in the bloodshed, the fight for life, and their subsequent death.

My eyes were wide open, and saw that we were the actual terrorists, we were the ones creating chaos and murdering innocent people for their resources, we had no right — as we have no right to take the lives of innocent animals — to invade or enter into those countries. Meanwhile, here at home, we people of color were being terrorized for years by the police. The lies we've been told about people in other countries, the environmental destruction humanity takes part in, the unnecessary killing of animals for food, imprisonment in zoos and aquariums, torture and murder in test labs. Why do these things resonate so much with me? Because as a black man, we also suffered these injustices and were marginalized in much the same way animals are . . .”

After reading this interview, I wonder how relevant the following comments by Marlene Mountain are:

“We have been ‘taught’ alienation and it seems imperative now that we seek that which affirms the common ground of all organisms.”

I was hesitant at first to include parts of the interview from the vegan pamphlet, as I don't wish to misuse this space for political commentary, however, after reading up on Marlene Mountain, I feel that it touches on some issues which the poet has dealt with in her work, and that it gave me a springboard from which to see the poem in a wider context.

(It may also be worth bearing in mind that a great many of the haiku poets who defined the genre were Buddhists, and went to great lengths to not harm other living beings, and this, in turn, greatly influenced haiku culture. Though Marlene Mountain may have issues with such a Nippon-centric take on haiku, as in the essay they don't shoot horses do they? she states: “those who champion the Japanese Spirit and its complex paraphernalia for North Americans are under considerable delusion.”)

As regards the topic of war, Marlene Mountain also has various haiku that tackle the topic explicitly. Take, for example, the following one-line haiku:

a live update the men's war brushes off more 'collateral damage'

Is not the death of a pig for human consumption another example of ‘collateral damage’? In the aforementioned essay the poet is critical of anthropocentrism and authoritarianism, and at one point asks: “Must we continue to be subjected to hierarchical concepts which separate us from all other organisms?”

The comments I selected from the pamphlet, which touch on a variety of political topics, may shed little light on the poem in a strictly textual sense. And, if I’m honest, when I read the haiku I see little more than the image of a person and a pig, sharing in the spring rain. And it moves me. It has a restrained pathos that is representative of the best of haiku. But when I stop and think about the haiku — that is to say, not simply participate in the haiku moment — I cannot help but wonder about my own conduct and how political my personal decisions are.

One thing I know for sure: the spring rain falls on pig and person alike.

Ajaya Mahala sees rain as a great leveller:

I have come to know that in some cultures there is a custom to throw a pig into the air to invoke rain. But I do not find any connection between the custom and the haiku under consideration.

I consider spring rain to be untimely rain for which no one, including animals, is prepared. When it starts raining, everyone runs to the nearest shelter. There is a strong visual image depicting either the simultaneous running of the poet alongside a pig, or their sharing a common shelter, which may be a place under the tree canopy or an old barn.

The haiku also highlights another important aspect. Rain is one of the greatest levelers and it does not distinguish between a man and a pig. As a corollary, all forms of life on earth are exposed to the vagaries of nature and anyone of them can be as helpless as others in the group.

Quite incidentally, both the words ‘pig’ and ‘I’ appear respectively in the words ‘spring’ and ‘rain.’

The haiku, though very small in terms of syllable count, brings to mind the helter skelter images of an untimely rain so lively.

Dan Schwerin asks himself where the small i fits:

I think I saw this first in an article written by Cor van der Heuvel in Time magazine. I remember how arresting it was, and how it invited me deeper into the consideration of writing haiku. This poem is almost emblematic, and its openness is part of the allure. How and where does the small i fit? The small i is unobtrusive and in proportion to the created order. Here we are, two earthy creatures enveloped by the rain that unlocks creation from its icy grip. We share the coldness and the spring. My uncle farmed hogs. I had a hog farmer in one of my parishes. There is nothing glamorous within a half-mile radius of hogs. Pigs, being smart animals, likely understand this about us, too. So we share all of life with each other:

pig and i spring rain

Brilliant.

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

RE:VIRALS 110

spring foghorn . . .
cormorants spilling
from an over-crowded ledge
— Paul Miller (*Called Home*, 2006)

Lynne Rees is haunted by the spaces between the lines:

Sound, sight and movement, and texture. These are the explicit physical senses through which the haiku speaks to me. But there must be more haunting the images and the spaces between the lines to produce an element of unease in me.

There's warning in the sound of the foghorn. Spring tides (despite the natural response of 'joy' that we have to the idea of Spring) can be dangerous and have stronger than usual rip currents. The company of black birds spills into the air like a ragged cloak of wing and cry. There's a sense of danger, or risk, implicit in an overcrowded ledge.

The ellipsis at the end of line 1 indicates hesitation and uncertainty. spilling/ at the end of line 2 also allows the reader to experience that sense of falling into the white space on the page. Line 3 ends gruffly with the definite thump of a single syllable: ledge.

Twice in the last two days I have read the closing line from e.e. cummings' poem, 'maggie and milly and molly and may': it's always ourselves we find in the sea. And the sea envelops this haiku. But while cormorants are creatures of the sea, mostly able to withstand its capricious character, the fate of human beings is less certain.

If I am honest I do not want to face what this haiku has engendered in me: people spilling into a dangerous sea from an overcrowded raft, their (Spring?) hopes drowned. But at the same time I am unable to turn away from it. it's always ourselves we find in the sea

Of course my interpretation may not be remotely close to what Paul Miller had in mind when he wrote this poem. But all the proof is on the page to assure me that my response is valid.

Clayton Beach is taken back to his childhood:

Cormorants, gawky, long-necked and oily, with a hazy blue sheen over their eyes like cataracts, are ill-equipped for existence outside of the water, but as soon as they enter, they become aquabatic torpedos — disappearing into the murky depths only to come back to the surface minutes later, glutted on fish. There's a spot along Jimmy Durante Blvd. in Del Mar, California, heading past the fairgrounds to the beach, where one nearly always finds the telephone wires sagging with cormorants, back to back, sunning themselves dry, this ku brings me back to my childhood in San Diego.

Evoking this personal memory for me, the awkward, humorous birds crammed shoulder to shoulder, vying for the warmest spot on a ledge, I find the kigo interesting — is there a deeper meaning to “spring foghorn,” beyond it merely being a foghorn heard in spring? Is it a trumpet call of renewal, ushering in the new season? The foghorn for me usually is a melancholy sound, the deep mists of fall and winter mornings, heard distant and muted from an open window in the wee hours of a sleepless morning, and yet the cormorants evoke feelings of the hot sun glittering on the surface of the bay, their eyes sea-blue and alien, thus there is a conflict and tension between the two images for me.

I imagine a red foghorn buoy, rocking slightly in the bay, the cormorants jockeying for a place on the ledge, perhaps a sea lion is sunning lazily on the other side when suddenly the horn sounds and the birds startle, one after another losing balance and diving into the water, a black cascade of lithe birds, kniving their way into the splashless water.

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

RE:VIRALS 111

人に生死蒨田鳥の争うよ
Life and death for man;
a battle fought by chickens
on the paddy stubble

— Shin'ichi Takeda (*Haiku Universe for the 21st Century*,
2008)

Marietta McGregor finds the broader perspective:

Well, I think this haiku or senryu by Shin'ichi Takeda certainly puts petty human squabbling into a broader perspective. The scene is set after the rice crop has been harvested, perhaps as the weather becomes colder and bleaker in late autumn. Preparations should have been made for winter by now, because it is possible that the area will be under snow quite soon. The farm chickens are still out and about, scratching through the scant remnants, finding a few grains that have sifted into the stubble, worth fighting over, but only if you're a hungry chicken. The shift from humans to chickens is profound. To me, the poet seems to convey that the grandiosity of purpose and justification for fighting world wars is sheer folly. He brings the conflict right down to its trivial and futile basics. The chickens are not going to win much from the rice field, for all their ruffled feathers. Neither will humans.

Clayton Beach helps break down the Japanese original:

Without finding any biographical information for the author beyond his birth date (1935), it is hard to know exactly which conflict this haiku was written in response to. Based on the author's age, in all likelihood it is either the Korean War or the long turmoil in Vietnam that culminated in the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war, but it could refer to any number of violent conflicts in Asia that have occurred since the end of World War II. The fact that there are so many possible conflicts in which this haiku makes sense is a testament to its potency and relevance as a haiku of social consciousness,

and only deepens the sense of tragedy and the futility of war engendered by the contrast between human war and chickens squabbling over rice in a field that was just harvested.

This is an excellent example of modern haiku, or “gendai haiku,” that still contains all the elements required of strict *yuki teikei* (5-7-5, seasonal format) while making a poignant social commentary. The word for “life and death” *seishi kari*, functions as a pivot word, sharing the symbol 刈 (*kari*) with the word *karita*, or “paddy stubble/harvested rice field.” The fact that the kanji used for *kari* is the one contained in the word for life and death, rather than the 刈 that would normally be used in the word for harvested rice field, “paddy stubble,” means that the entire phrase also functions as the neologism *seishikarita*, “rice field of life and death.” This dual meaning deepens the metaphorical resonance of the *ku* in a more nuanced and complex manner than is communicable in English translation. In addition to the *kigo* and wordplay, the poem ends in the emphatic cutting word *yo*.

Thus, in the Japanese, the poem begins with men locked in a struggle for life and death, killing and dying in the autumn rice fields that perhaps are still smoldering from being burnt to renew the soil, and ends with their battle being transformed into a lowly chicken fight. Rather than the bombastic heroism of the Holy War haiku of fascist Japan under Kyoshi’s watchful eye, this post-war haiku takes a critical, anti-war stance, elucidating the destructiveness of war with the autumnal sense of harvest and endings, and underscoring the futility of man’s endeavors as our great battles are reduced to the squawking, mindless fighting of the hen-yard.

The use of the *yuki-teikei* format and complex literary language makes it very clear that this poem is still part of the traditional haiku tradition, and is not a *senryu*, underscoring how different views of the permissibility of politics and human nature in haiku are between modern Japanese haiku poets and the “traditionalist” view of English-language haiku, where many would be tempted to erroneously call this poem a *senryu*.

Jacob Salzer looks within:

In this haiku, we see the absurdity of wars. Why is human history often not

a story of progress, but one of endless wars and violence? The ego is the problem. Power for land, power for money: all corruption-based, all ego-based, and all transient. What a waste. None of this reflects the true nature of man that is the human spirit, and that is within us. We must go beyond the ego, and quiet the mind. It seems it would become easier once we realized it was never our true nature to begin with . . . But, it seems the mind is heavily conditioned through years of patterns, and is turned outwards vs. within. It revolves itself into a personal “me” and is convinced it is permanently apart from all life and others: this is the myth of identity.

It seems some people believe they are nothing but little “me’s” running around, apart from “others” and other life forms. As innocent children, people just throw stuff at us to shape and mold an individual mind in certain ways. Rare are those who can turn to question those things and discover what dwells beneath the surface . . . Indeed, we do appear separate and live separate lives, but, whether we realize it or not, everything is connected — in a myriad of subtle and obvious ways. The space between us is very important, like waves of the ocean. Those spaces allow us to breathe. But are those waves not one with the great ocean and its unfathomable depths? But it seems our differences are too vast for some people to understand: they do not realize we are ultimately expressions of the same life. Nothing new here: E Pluribus Unum is the Great Seal of the United States and translates to “Out of Many, One”. There is great danger within the “my way or the highway” mentality . . . Some people lack understanding, which can lead to a lack of acceptance, and violence. The ego is attached to labels, forming the “us and them” mentality, and this only strengthens the myth of identity.

So, does this haiku reflect an internal war within (some) humans? Indeed, it seems all wars start from within us, and the animal-nature within us is nothing in comparison to the heart of man, that expresses itself as basic kindness, and compassion. But even these qualities have extremes, and it seems we should proceed with great caution; as this haiku reminds us, there are impressions and wars within people. And there are breaking points in the mind, cracks in the mind, which may reveal deeper layers beneath the surface.

Let’s just hope that the mind and heart may become one within people: Let’s

hope for greater understanding and compassion. The balance and unity between the heart and the mind: it seems this is a great secret. Indeed, it is the end of the primal war — the war that starts all wars: the war that is within.

Ajaya Mahala identifies insatiable desires:

The image of a cockfight in the haiku conveys to the readers a scene of entertainment in some primitive pastoral society. But the implications are far more prophetic, going beyond the horizons of any human civilization. It speaks less of entertainment and more of the non-ending fight for lust, greed and power.

It's the symbol of our conflict on the basis of our position, economic prowess or false vanity. Gamecocks become the symbol of the authority of their respective owners. This is in the same way as a diamond necklace is used for satisfying the sense of vanity of a woman — or, as in modern times, nuclear arsenals in the hands of state heads have become the tools to prove supremacy over others.

Therefore, the image in the haiku is not simply a duel between gamecocks to spill blood and pluck feathers. The poor creatures become pawns in the hands of their masters, giving shape to their nefarious designs, and the haiku quite sarcastically reflects the insatiable desire of man to grab power by whatever barbaric means necessary.

Aparna Pathak makes mention of metempsychosis:

Shin'ichi's haiku questions our ways of living. An amazing haiku that looks at life and its sustenance.

Man is stuck in the eternal cycle of life and death. Those who believe in reincarnation also believe in karma and its dependency on rebirth.

Whereas we are lost in the quest of an afterlife, animals struggle to survive on a daily basis.

Somehow their struggle is also on the increase as humans have been influential in disturbing the food chain as well as vegetation on the planet.

Chickens and rice paddies both belong to our daily life. A chicken's struggle is just about having grains for survival, nothing more, nothing less. We are more into wars and dominance but other creatures still live with their basic requirements and go on without any fuss. Luxurious life and our obsession with technology is perhaps drifting us away from the fundamentals.

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

RE=VIRALS 112

è già mattino —
a pioggia bussa ai vetri con
cento dita

it's morning —
rain knocks to the window
with one hundred fingers
— Lucia Cardillo (*Otata 22, 2017*)

Hansha Teki sees rain as a possible intruder:

Not having experienced the seasons in Italy, I imagine here an abrupt awakening on a morning in late summer. The first line conveys startled surprise (it's [already] morning), but it is not clear whether there is a sense of relief or annoyance. Has the summer been too long, hot, and dry? Has the night's sleep been too short? Is the rain tapping against the glass, "with one hundred fingers," the poet's 'man from Porlock' or is it the good news awaited with so much anticipation?

The rain seems driven against the glass by wind, marking a new morning — the end of a period of drought perhaps.

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

REVIRALS 113

猪がきて空気を食べる春の峠

a wild boar

comes and eats air

spring mountain path

— Kaneko Tohta (*Selected Haiku With Notes and Commentary*
Part 2:1961 – 2012, Red Moon Press, 2012)

Bob Lucky's friends cry "Havok":

Years ago in Kobe a friend's parents were having problems with wild boars coming down into their garden, with its traditional teahouse, and wrecking havoc. I like the image of the boars eating the air (a Hindi expression for taking a stroll, which has nothing to do with this haiku but still adds to it in some way) because it puts their snouts up into the air rather than down in to the ground, where they tend to root around. In this haiku, in spring, the hunt is on.

Lynne Rees revises:

The translation of poetry has to be one of the most challenging arts. How can someone translate words, syntax, sound, rhythm and connotation from one language to another and be sure of achieving something comparable to the original author's intention? How does the translator balance commitment to the original text with the necessity of creating poetic effect in the translated one? I am not a translator. And while my reasonable grasp of French and Spanish might help me produce a passable English translation of a short poem in either of those languages, all other languages are beyond my reach. So it's the translation of Kaneko Tohta's haiku that I must respond to.

I appreciate the overall scene the haiku conjures but I'm less satisfied with a close reading: the word choice and syntax.

The second line is staccato: it lacks the more natural rhythm of, say, 'comes and eats the air'. Although 'comes and eats' feels rather prosaic too: is the addition of 'comes' adding anything? Would a different verb more effectively

communicate the writer's intention?

And 'spring mountain path' feels overly compressed. I appreciate that haiku is a poetry of distillation but, for me, the last line attempts to pack in too much of a seasonal punch and I find myself struggling to 'imagine' that mountain path in spring. What's the weather like? What plants might be there? Is it warm/chilly?

So please forgive me for what I'm about to do, Kaneto Tohta and the Kon Nichi Translation Group.

mountain path
a wild boar eats
the spring air

But now I can taste the air with the wild boar on the side of that mountain. And isn't that what we all want to do? Enter a poem and be a part of it?

Joseph Salvatore Aversano cites Snyder:

I at times get squeamish when seeing predators tear at their freshly captured prey on National Geographic Wild. However, as Gary Snyder reminds us in his poem "Spel Against Demons," "aimless executions and slaughterings / are not the work of wolves and eagles // but the work of hysterical sheep". Thus, predators in the wild take only what is needed. Now enter our wild boar onto the stage of a wild mountain path in spring. Spring is not only about flowers, but renewed power and life. Birth is after all the birthright of all living creatures. Moreover, as a fellow omnivore, the boar feeds on everything, even the air! Breathing air is also the birthright of all creatures, whether gulping it down like a frenzied wild pig, or inhaling softly like a sleeping baby. Namely, the act of tearing at flesh for sustenance is no more violent than breathing. The boar reminds us of our own dependence on food, water, and air; and it reminds us of something rather uncanny, the violence which goes hand in hand with that very dependence.

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

REVIRALS 114

quietly
we become
audience

— Hilary Tann (*Frogpond* 27.1)

Linda Weir applauds the poem:

This poem shows the power of haiku, as it expresses so much in so few words. Haiku are often about small moments keenly perceived, and Hilary Tann's 'quietly' haiku is such a moment, one that we've all experienced but I've not seen captured in other haiku. Beginning with the word quietly, as a reader I expected this poem to have an emphasis on sound, which it does, but it also layers in so much more for me. Reading the words, I hear that moment when the crowd's conversations die down and the group of individuals is transformed into an audience. Without a word about sight, it calls to my mind the darkness as the house lights go down in the movie theater or playhouse. It invites me to step back into my memories of such experiences: horror films where the audience participates shouting warnings to the soon-to-be-next victim or applause as the *Star Wars* theme begins again on a big screen. It plays with me in other ways, as it makes me think about 'we become audience' as that sense of community a group of mostly strangers can have almost instantly and yet is often lacking in public life these days as we divide ourselves into various affiliations and avoid experiencing that sense of togetherness. Returning from the mental travels the haiku inspired, I realize that I've just been audience to an excellent haiku performance, and give the poet a standing ovation.

Ajaya Mahala thinks in terms of phrase and fragment:

The whole haiku may be containing only the phrase. If any break is there, it is after the adverb 'quietly' but that too coincides with the remaining part without leaving any scope for juxtaposition. But the nicest part of the haiku

is that juxtaposition takes place with an unknown background or seasonal event that is not explicitly stated. The haiku turns out to be a juxtaposition of the known with the unknown, of the visible with the invisible.

The haiku may specifically make reference to a particular source of sound, say, a cuckoo's call casting its spell on every listening soul in the neighborhood. It may also be the growing sound of a waterfall that we are approaching and here our quietude becomes the contrasting backdrop to the growing sweet noise of the waterfall. The sources may be multiple as it happens when there is spring everywhere. There are distinct changes in the sky and earth, and virtually we become silent "audience" to these transformations taking place on a grand scale.

There can be innumerable haiku situations that this particular haiku of Hilary Tann suggests. The use of pronoun "we" indicates collective engagement of several persons in the scene. There lies the magic of group perception that often the experience of a single observer fails to portray. For this reason, we enjoy a song more in a concert by becoming a part of the grand audience rather than playing it solitarily for one's self. The poet has tapped the power of a pronoun in her alchemy of this short poem.

Hansha Teki's talks of communion:

Within the apparent simplicity of this four-word statement a transformation is in progress. Every word contributes to the sense of reverence the poem creates and evokes. There is an immediate sense of being in attendance at a performance by a music ensemble. As the performers come out, a hush descends and the many "ones" become one as attentive listeners to the music that is about to follow. A revelation is at hand just as there is in any time of total attentiveness to any encounter which is passed to us through any or all of our senses. The revelation of the "other" begins for each who has "ears to hear" and in which communion is experienced.

Clayton Beach further dissects the pronoun possibilities:

This ku on one hand is meditative and hermetic, tapping into a long tradition of haiku on the topic of the contemplative life and haiku as a poetry of selfless observation. It is interesting in that, while the opening adverb “quietly” imbues a *sabi* flavor, in the original sense of the Japanese language the root of *sabi* is loneliness and here this ku uses the plural “we.” In a sense, the “we” could be read as a generalization or “royal we,” but it is interesting to note the choice of pronoun and how it invites the reader into the ku to become both participant to the action of the poem and accomplice to the writer. “You,” would make the poem abrasively imperative, while “I” would seem egoistic, so the “we” inhabits a more open position, tapping into our shared humanity.

“We become,” can be taken on its own, as a statement of fact of our continual “becoming” in the process of what Jung would call individuation on one hand (a “*cogito ergo sum*”) and on the other hand it can pivot into “we become audience,” turning the focus outward to the act of observation and a voyeuristic, detached and passive observation of life and the external rather than the inward, lived experience of true engagement and unencumbered being. In this sense, the ku is both about the inward qualia of life-experience and self, but also concerned with the outward process of observation; the world becomes the stage of a drama to which we are mere audience. The lack of a direct object of observation makes this somewhat ironic, for, in calling attention to the fact of our continuing observation and experience of consciousness, it causes a mental break away from the ku, with a disjunctive effect arising from the fact that in order to truly enter this ku, one must leave it and become attentive to the actual reality outside of the poetic world.

In that sense, this haiku is somewhat of an anti-ku, at least in the orthodox, haiku-moment centered sense of English-language haikai, in that there is not a single, timeless moment captured in words for the reader to enter and become one with, but the infinite continuity of the stream of the “now,” to which we as readers become attuned every time we enter or re-enter the poem; the subject is the “nowness” of being. As a poem, this functions somewhat as a “machine that turns itself off,” or in this case rather a “text that serves only to open a doorway that leads out of the text.”

Mary Stevens is influenced by the biographical:

Learning that Hilary Tann is a professional musician and professor of music changed this poem for me. I had imagined a group of friends at a dinner party, where one talkative friend dominates the conversation. With no opportunity to get a word in edgewise, the others succumb to the role of “audience.” Another possibility could be a small child with a flair for dramatics capturing the attention of the rest of the family through her singing, dancing, or tantrum.

Discovering Tann’s relationship to music made me look at this poem with the literal sense of “audience.” While this poem can be read simply as an audience settling down as the music begins, it also captures the way music draws each individual into a certain emotional state—and the magical and subtle way it works on The Collective. Individuals become connected through the same mysterious experience. By intermission we are changed and the topics and quality of our conversation is different.

And then there are those moments when we—as the world, a country, or a subgroup in a country—have watched major world events on television together, at first speechless and many of us covering our mouths: the assassination of Kennedy, the towers crumbling and collapsing on September 11, 2001, and various clips of mass shootings and acts of police brutality on yet another African-American man. These moments give us pause. When we speak again, what are the first words we tend to say? As a witnessing collective, what do we want them to be?

Danny Blackwell ponders sound and silence:

While preparing this week’s re:Virals I learnt, as did some others who have contributed comments, that the author of the haiku under discussion is a musician, and I just noticed that each line has 3 syllables, and the haiku has the effect of sounding, to my ear at least, as a run of triplets. Even taking into account the possible pauses between lines, the lines still tend to have a feel of triplets because of the natural rhythms and stresses of the English language. This is not, however, something I noticed during the many readings I

made of this poem, and only occurred to me when I decided to take on the potentially odious and pedantic task of analyzing it, and it may be that the meter is of negligible import in comparison to the content, and that the rhythm arises accidentally, as it were, from the message the poet wanted to convey. (Passing from musical to poetic terminology, the meter of this poem would be mainly considered as consisting of dactyls, although one might consider line 2 as a molossus or an anapest—meaning, in layman’s terms, that the stress is placed equally on each syllable of “we become,” or with a stress falling on the final syllable.)

But syllable-counting aside, I wonder if the poem speaks to the phenomenon of the musicians, before or after performing a piece, as they listen to the applause of the audience, and therefore become the “audience” of the audience, paying witness to the sound of the public, turned performers with their sonic applause. (The resulting paradox being that the poem could explicitly revolve around the word “quietly,” while implicitly being about the noise of a grateful audience.) Or maybe the musicians become one with the audience in the reverent silence between songs, which unites the musicians and audience as one collective “audience,” all performing a truncated version of John Cage’s 4’33”.

Peter Newton is spellbound:

I’ve always been drawn to this poem. It’s ability to contain so much. The poem transports the reader to one specific and familiar moment. The instant of sudden calm when a number of assembled individuals agree that they are part of a larger group. The many become one. The small talk ends abruptly. Voices trail off. They are all in this together, by choice. In four words Hillary Tann communicates this occasion. Something about this extreme brevity translates the magic of the performance about to be witnessed. A play? A concert? Who knows? There’s a collective respect for the stage. For those who are about to perform. An unwritten contract. The audience adds their attention, thus completing the essential ingredient to suspend one’s disbelief. A spell that is only broken with applause when the one audience becomes many again.

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

RE:VIRALS 115

never touching
his own face
tyrannosaurus

— John Stevenson (*Acorn* 27, 2011)

Marion Clarke is this week's undisputed Queen, and not at all tyrannical, weighing in with the following comment:

This haiku by John Stevenson made me smile. Poor T. Rex—his arms were too short to reach his face, so how on earth did he cope with an itchy nose?!

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

REVIRALS 110

all day long
i feel its weight
the unworn necklace

— Roberta Beary (*Pocket Change*, Red Moon Press, 2000)

Bob Aspey reveals the handmaid's tale:

Pearls are most lustrous when warmed to body heat they say. Victorian and Edwardian ladies would have their maids wear their pearl necklaces during the day so that they had the opportunity to shimmer and shine at their best when they were at dinner or a ball. Beary's poem prompted recollection of Carol Ann Duffy's "Warming Her Pearls" in which we eavesdrop on the musings of a maid about her mistress as she wears her necklace. As the poem progresses it becomes clear that her feelings run deep. The poem concludes:

“(. .) And I lie here awake,
knowing the pearls are cooling even now
in the room where my mistress sleeps. All night
I feel their absence and I burn.”

In its three short lines Beary's poem captures the same longing and desire for an unattainable and unrequited love, and the sense of loss and separation of the maid on those days when she does not wear the necklace for her mistress. Even its absence bears a weight.

Hansha Teki feels the weight of a Biblical millstone:

Each time that I read this poem, I visualise the poet in a courtroom sitting through a tedious divorce procedure “all day long.” The next two lines suggest a number of possible meanings that serve to enrich the power of the poem, the ambiguity evoking the conflicting emotions of the speaker. Does “the unworn necklace” represent a token attempt by the other at pursuing

reconciliation? Should she accept the gift or shouldn't she? The weight of it is not just in the decision to be made but is also suggestive of the possibility of being weighed down again by a marriage that has lost its flavour.

The weight of the unworn necklace further suggests a Biblical millstone hung around one's neck. Millstones were turned by asses so that the weight of one would grind wheat into flour against the other. Jesus had suggested in Matthew 18:6 that for whosoever should offend against a child's simple faith, it would be better that such a millstone be hung around the neck so that the offender would be swallowed up in the abyss of the sea. Every parent in a divorce proceeding must surely be aware of the possible affect on any children born of the marriage (perhaps itself now a millstone) and weighs that up as the case proceeds to its final resolution.

Roberta Beary has evoked the conflicting emotions of release and of guilt consequent to such a milestone event with unflinching courage.

Ajaya Mahala is reminded of Archimedes:

The place for a necklace is a neck.

As we never feel the physical weight of our head, the physical weight of a necklace is also not felt. The metaphysical dimensions are more profound than the physical, and Roberta's haiku, while misleading the naive readers to the physical weight of a necklace, lends another meaning to the haiku for more intellectual interpretations.

A necklace, when worn, adds to the beauty of a woman and its weight is forgotten in the ecstasy. But when love dries up and there is a break-up in the relationship, the buoyancy—Archimedes comes to my mind—offered by love is lost, and the weight of the necklace remains. All of a sudden, a thing of beauty and grace becomes a thing of burden!

Then why to carry the weight throughout the day? The answer probably is this. A valuable thing like a necklace cannot be thrown away easily, for the simple reason of a sweet relationship turning sour within minutes. As relationships take a long time to build up, they cannot be rejected outright. A lot of pondering is involved before the ultimate course is taken. The necklace, standing as a symbol of a broken relationship, has to be carried for

quite some time with some sense of burden.

But it cannot continue for days, weeks, months or years. If incompatibility continues, a new equilibrium of human relationship shall come into play, which shall shed all kinds of burden.

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

REVIRALS 117

spring cleaning
I throw away dreams
that almost came true

— Angela Terry (*Frogpond* 34:3, 2011)

Marion Clarke wonders:

Oh! Angela Terry's haiku instantly reminded me of Hemingway's piece of micro fiction, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn" and I began to wonder what these items could be that the narrator is throwing away and what were those dreams? Did this person's wedding plans fall to pieces and she is finally getting rid of her wedding dress? Is it the tools of a particular trade that the narrator is selling because he failed to achieve the required grades? Everyone has unfulfilled dreams, but the fact that the narrator is clearing out these items that represent those dreams can be seen as positive, it is time to move on.

Julie Warther is reminded of pack rat's fondness for filling their nests with "treasures":

The effectiveness of this haiku, for me, lies in the back and forth of possible outcomes I imagine resulting from the poet's decision in the last two lines. For an idealist with pack rat tendencies, this poem holds real discomfort. "dreams that almost came true" are also dreams that could still come true. I hate to discard something only to discover a use for it three days later. It's happened too many times before for me to let go easily. And yet . . . I've also experienced the calm that comes after a cleanse. One doesn't have to study feng shui to understand our surroundings affect our mood, energy, health, and productivity. Our internal landscapes must surely hold even more sway on our well-being. To let go of old dreams might offer a sense of release and relief. Spring, after all, is a time for new beginnings.

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

RE:VIRALS 118

and now . . .
passing through me
into eaves

— Robert D. Wilson (*A Soldier's Bones: Hokku and Haiku*,
2013)

Danny Blackwell is spaced out:

This week we had no comments submitted, so it falls upon me to say something about this haiku.

I have to confess that it wasn't a poem that really spoke to me and, upon trying to say something about it, I'm not even sure what it is about. That isn't necessarily a bad thing, as many haiku defy easy assimilation on the first reading and truly benefit from further philosophizing, so the question is whether the problem is the haiku or the reader—in this case, me. Maybe I'm not up to the challenge?

The first line “and now . . .” doesn't really give much information, and I find myself asking whether it is redundant to state “now” in a haiku. What gives me pause for further consideration, however, is the use of the word “and.” One cannot help wonder what came before it. Beginning in medias res can be an incredibly effective technique. I'm reminded of the opening to Lorca's *La casada infiel*, for example, which intentionally starts on the second line, leaving us with a sense of something unsaid, which could either be a reference to what the narrator is omitting, or it could be taken as a reference to the oral romance tradition that often left us with fragmentary texts. (The epic *Song of My Cid*, for example, is missing the opening.) In this case, I'm not sure I can unravel the reason behind this “and now,” other than to create an enigmatic ambiguity for its own sake. Again, I reiterate, I may not be living up to my expectation as a critical reader. The first line doesn't give me anything to work with in order to (re)construct the poem, or the poet's experience. But maybe that is the intention.

As regards “passing through me/into eaves,” we don't know what is passing

through the narrator. The word eaves might suggest rain but, if that were the case, how does the rain pass through the poet and then into the eaves?

One reader asked me to clarify if I had published the poem with a typo. (The email simply read: “leaves?!”) So maybe I am not alone in feeling at a loss.

I could conjecture a variety of readings but I feel like I would be potentially clutching at straws.

The poet has good credentials and the collection this haiku is taken from features introductory comments by David G. Lanoue and David Landis Barnhill.

“Open your mind and expect the unexpected,” says Lanoue of these “wonderful, jarring, delightful, and provocative discoveries.”

Maybe this week’s selected poem is intentionally jarring or provocative, I don’t know, but I’m left feeling like I didn’t quite get it.

“They are full of the pause of *ma*,” says Barnhill, and talking about the way in which Wilson “cleaves” his haiku to create juxtapositions (“three periods acting as his kireji or cutting word”) Barnhill says that the poet “creates a space for the reader, not to “fill in” that space but to be filled by it.”

For me personally this poem has too much space—and while I would be able to construct a poem from the materials I have been given, I doubt it would bear much resemblance to the experience that provoked the poet to write it. One has to be honest: one either feels something or they don’t, and this poem left me without any real emotional or literary reaction, although I will say that the words are beautiful enough . . . and maybe they are in the right order. Maybe the problem is also one of genre and I am not reading this, as I should, as an experimental haiku. My failure to be moved is no value judgment on the author’s work, only on one person’s (possibly faulty) reading of one poem.

There is no doubt that the poem is able to provoke something in others because it was selected by a reader last week for commentary, so I will leave the comments section open this week and hopefully others out there can give their belated reactions to Wilson’s haiku. (Those of you that wish to comment on the haiku I have selected this week please use the contact form as mentioned in the submission instructions below.)

Last minute addition:

I was fortunate enough to be able to contact Robert D. Wilson, the author of this week's poem, and he was kind enough to elucidate with the following:

“The now, the moment, is passing through me into the eaves that represent the past. All is static, all is in a state of becoming, the now is a passersby.”

These comments included a caveat: “How I interpret my hokku (. . .) is unimportant. Each reader subjects it to his or her own interpretation. No two interpretations are alike.”

Wilson also clarified that this poem, taken from his collection of “hokku and haiku,” is not a haiku, as I had referred to it, but a hokku, and went on to define his hokku as “action biased,” as opposed to “object biased.” Wilson has some articles online for those that wish to read more on the subject.

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

REVIRALS 110

雨雲にはらのふくるる蛙かな

rain clouds

inflating its belly

the frog

— Fukuda Chiyo-ni (1703 – 1775; tr. D. Blackwell)

Linda Weir feels connected:

The two parts to this poem are closely linked for me. The rain clouds portend rain, and the frog's inflated belly happens just before it voices its song. A frog's call often signifies rain or rain coming. This poem is full of the promise of spring—breeding frogs in the rain, shower leading to spring wildflowers, young animals soon to be.

It could be a modern poem in a suburban neighborhood, but there is an additional joy in noting that it is a translated poem from the past, making me feel a connection to the timelessness of this experience and the human condition and its connection to the natural world.

Bob Aspey sympathizes with the bullfrog:

In Louisiana there is a Creole saying: *Laplie tombé, ouaouaron chanté* — when rain is coming, the bullfrogs sing.

Many frog species respond to humidity changes prior to rainfall by calling, either alone or in chorus. As the rain arrives and the frogs gather together in their breeding sites, the calls segue into mating songs. Males compete with each other to be heard and females respond to the males with their own song.

It's tough being a bullfrog. To stand a chance of mating successfully he has to stand out from the crowd and females prefer louder, more intense and lower songs. So the bigger frogs, the ones who can inflate their resonance chambers the most, will get the girls. Chiyo-ni captures the moment the frog begins to inflate preparatory to singing. Will he win out?

But with climate change and industrialization encroaching on breeding sites and altering food availability, frog numbers are falling. More than 120 frog species have gone extinct since 1980, and in 2006 over 1,300 species were considered to be threatened. There was not enough evidence to be able accurately assess the status of over 1,400 more.

As the singers leave the stage, the chorus falls silent

Dan Schwerin helps complete the poetry:

In a world tearing at the seams, this haiku exemplifies why haiku has something holistic and healing to offer. Haiku needs a reader to complete some tired humble jotting we call a poem. Our poems have been called breath poems because they are so minimal. In addition, we exhale some small thing that another inhales for meaning, or joy, or to add to the one large poem we are writing about being human. This haiku points to the larger interdependence that is our life together. I love how the poem has a letting go—the clouds are full, heavy, pregnant, and may let go in some near future. That said, the frog's belly is in a place of taking in. This breathing out and breathing in, letting go, letting be, and becoming, is the story of which we are all a part. This haiku dares to suggest a frog's belly and our appetites are part of a generous whole. And we are fed. Don't take my word for it, there will be another perspective, another poem, another someone, and we are blessed by the abundance. Thanks for this forum, and these poems.

Clayton Beach paraverses:

雨雲にはらのふくるる蛙かな
rain clouds inflating its belly the frog
—Fukuda Chiyo-ni (1703–1775)

I find this translation inserts a bit of English language haiku aesthetics on what is a slightly different poem in the Japanese. For starters, the poem reads as a fragment and phrase in English, with an implied cut after the first line:

rain clouds<>
inflating its belly
the frog

If this were so, the first part would read 雨雲や (*amagumo ya*). If that were the case, it might just be better put without the additionally deranged syntax of the first translation:

rain clouds—
the frog inflates
its belly

However, this *ku* does not have a standard mid-line cut like Bashō's "old pond" with its use of the *kireji ya*. In this case it actually has the end-cut *kana*, which provides a playful, wistful trailing off. As a *kireji*, *kana* invites a juxtaposition between the current stanza and the next, it is an open ended, incomplete ending almost like an enunciated ellipsis or semi-colon. So it may be better to translate the poem without a sense of interruption, with an ellipsis or question mark at the end, avoiding a "fragment and phrase," as in these two possibilities:

in the rain cloud
is it a frog
that inflates his pouch just so?

toward the rain clouds
the frog inflates his pouch,
I wonder. . .

These are more wistful and playful interpretations, but the *ku* was written by Chiyo, not Bashō, and should be seen in terms of her unique style. She was writing in a period after Bashō, when haiku was exploding in popularity in the wake of the late master's passing, and her teacher promoted the *karumi* (slenderness) aesthetic of late Bashō rather than his earlier austere *sabi* aesthetic.

A surplus of students and teachers made this a time of folksy, light and at times frivolous haiku, a kind of “pop” aesthetic seen as inferior to the serious asceticism of middle Bashō by later conservative haiku theorists like Kyoshi, who was heavily critical of Chiyo and her contemporaries. I think her ku have their own kind of charm, and if looked at separately from Bashō, rather than being judged by his style, they are perfectly charming, if a bit simple. But again, this was the taste of her time, not a fault of her own, she was actually quite beloved in her day.

In this ku, there is a parallel between the billowing, blustering clouds and the frog’s pouch as he sings, perhaps even fancifully placing a frog in the clouds; “ni” can mean at, in on, to, for etc. and usually has a direction component. The “kana,” a questioning, pensive ending somewhat like “I wonder,” adds to this musing quality. Perhaps there was no frog at all, and Chiyo was merely daydreaming, looking at the shapes of the clouds and finding animals, or the distant thunderclap sounded like a frog, or perhaps there was an actual occurrence of a frog singing while she watched passing spring rain clouds that also coincidentally looked like a frog. The simplest explanation has the frog defiantly facing the clouds and pointing his inflated form their way. In any case, this ku asks for a lighter, airy style that is undercut by the uber-minimalist translation with a strong mid-cut as originally given.

A more sober interpretation, still respecting the style and use of language might be:

the frog
inflates his pouch
toward the rain clouds . . .

Here, the kana is translated as an ellipsis. While kana was used in haikai-renga to connect the two verses of linked pair, it is still used today in contemporary, solo haiku, to leave a poem open ended. The lack of following stanza with that implied sense of juxtaposition toward a latter half invites interpretation and a “what then?” In writing haiku in English, it would be profitable to occasionally emulate this style, rather than cutting in the middle with two images, we can provide a single image or image cluster and

leave things unfinished, ambiguous and invite the reader to “continue the verse,” so to speak.

Interestingly, while I was unable to find the author or source of the English translation we were given, in searching for it, I found this Spanish translation:

La rana
infla el buche
ante las nubes que traen la lluvia
(trans. Vicente Haya)

(The frog/inflates his throat/before the clouds that bring rain)

This translation is once again very literal and spare, but it at least keeps the continuous structure of the original rather than imposing a cut that was not there to begin with. With so many options, which translation do you prefer?

Danny Blackwell gets lost in translation:

I can't resist the temptation to abuse my editorial power and offer some words about my translation, which received some interesting criticism from Clayton above. And while I am partly motivated by poetic ego, I also feel that, at the very least, I need to offer the readers of re:Virals a romanization of the poem, to help them decipher Clayton's comments, as he has recourse to use them in his dissection:

雨雲にはらのふくるる蛙なか
amegumo ni hara no fukururu kawazu kana

First off, for the sake of simplicity, let's assume the frog is singular and the clouds are plural although that may not be the case, as the Japanese language often does not specify. With that caveat in place, I'd like to explain that there two things I wanted specifically to do in my translation. The first was to capture a common feature of the Japanese language, and therefore also to haiku, that of ending an oration with a noun and having all the preceding

material functioning as if it was a type of adjectifying of that final noun (in this case of the noun “frog”).

A literal rendering of the Japanese would therefore be something like this:

rain cloud belly-inflated frog

The English language would naturally reverse the order, of course, resulting in something like this:

the frog that inflates its belly in front of rain clouds

It is this feature of the Japanese language which explains why many haiku in translation change the order of the elements, and commonly result in the final line of a Japanese haiku becoming the opening line in the English versions—something that I was trying, precisely, to avoid.

Obviously, most would find the above poems, in which the poem is simply the word “frog” stacked under a series of qualifiers, to be pretty indigestible as poetry—bearing in mind the long tradition of haiku in translation and our acquired reading habits. In translation one has to strike a balance between the options of giving an air of exoticism that reflects the different language of the original, and trying to make it sound as natural in the target language as it would do to a speaker of the original language.

The second thing I wanted to do with my translation was allow the poem to maintain the possibility of a double reading. Clayton reads an implied kire after the first line, and while I intentionally allowed for that option, it is not the only option I am allowing the reader, and if one doesn't impose that cut, one can read the poem as:

rain clouds inflating its belly:
the frog

That is to say, it is the rain clouds themselves that inflate the frog's belly. This sense of the interpenetration between things is key to haiku juxtaposition, and I feel is particularly acute in this poem by Chiyo-ni.

The Japanese particle *ni* can be used purely to situate the existence of something in a geographical or temporal place, allowing the literal reading that Clayton references, in which the frog is actually seen in the clouds themselves. Regarding particles, one thing that surprised me when I lived in Japan is that while English speakers will naturally stress the words in a sentence that carry meaning and pretty much orally gloss over prepositions and so on, the Japanese do the opposite. When speaking the Japanese tend to place emphasis on particles, that is to say, the punctuative elements of a sentence. In haiku the marker *ya* (used after the words “old pond. . .” in Bashō’s frogpond haiku for example) is much easier to identify and translate, but I find that *ni* is also frequently used in haiku and does indeed cut the sentence, whether one interprets it as a *kireji* or not. I also feel that here *ni* is allowing us to imagine that the frog’s belly (or pouch) billows due to the rain clouds. This could be viewed as juxtapositional whimsy, or it could be, as another commentator this week mentions, a reference to a very natural phenomenon in which frogs react to approaching rain.

I intentionally avoided punctuation in my translation to allow this middle-line hinge possibility, but one can also read the poem, more conventionally perhaps, as:

rain clouds;
inflating its belly: the frog

Here I use the semi-colon, which I find particularly good for translating a cut between juxtaposing elements. (Whatever one thinks of Blyth, I think he is one of the best translators of punctuation in haiku and adapts his ideas for each particular poem with a great deal of nuance, and one would do well to study his work in this regard.)

Admittedly, my translation last week may seem like syntactical absurdity (to paraphrase Clayton) but I opted for “inflating its belly/the frog” as opposed to “the frog inflates its belly” because I wanted the word frog to be the last word, for the reasons stated above.

Setting aside his patriarchal preference in his translation of the Spanish translation, I would also question Clayton’s interpretation of the end marker

“kana.” Modern Japanese speakers often end sentences with the sounds “ka” and “na,” and sometimes with the two of them together. They are, respectively, an oral question mark (*ka*) and a question tag (*na*). They are more or less equivalent to saying “isn’t it,” or “I wonder,” at the end of a sentence. However, having discussed this with Japanese colleagues, it is my (possibly mistaken) understanding that the archaic literary *kana* (哉) of haiku is not equivalent to the modern day *kana* (かな) of everyday speech, which is much closer to the “kana” that Clayton seems to have offered in his translations. I would also question having “I wonder?” as a whole line in the English version, when it is only a line-end *kire*. That said, I welcome Clayton’s comments, which are always illuminating, and his criticism may well be justified—I’m afraid I’m not in a position to be wholly objective about my own translations. One thing I did find particularly worthy was Clayton’s suggestion that the word *kana* could be treated as a kind of trailing off, represented in one of his translations as an uncompleted ellipsis:

the frog
inflates his pouch
toward the rain clouds. . .

I should also mention that it is common, and perhaps at times justifiable, to translate “kana” as an exclamation mark, and it has been common throughout the history of English-language haiku translations to do so. This discussion is, without doubt, a long and complex one that is muddied by a long tradition in both languages.

Reading Clayton’s comments and alternative translations, I do admittedly find myself questioning my inclusion of the word “belly.” In using “pouch” Clayton is possibly more precise, as it is the vocal sac—and not the belly—of the frog that we are accustomed to seeing inflate (although the frog would first inflate its lungs in order to do so, and in the original Japanese they use the word for belly/stomach). Interestingly, a Colombian friend of mind objected to Spanish translator Vicente Haya’s use of the word *buche*, which she considered a rather ugly word.

As a final note, readers should be aware that haiku poems such as this one,

and the ubiquitous “old pond” poem of Bashō, use an archaic pronunciation for the kanji for frog, which is read here as “kawazu” instead of the modern day *kaeru*.

[Addendum 01/01/18: While Vicente Haya romanizes this poem with *kawazu* I have since found other sources using *kaeru*. Anyone able to definitively say which reading Chiyo-ni would have used please use the contact form and let us know.] Hopefully the re:Virals readers will comment further and help us to up our game, so to speak. Translation is always, to a degree, a form of deception—no matter how didactic its intentions.

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

RE:VIRALS 120

half autumn color. Come take my hand in the ghost land and
— David Boyer (*Bones* 14)

Danny Blackwell takes his time:

An enigmatic haiku. While a lot of the more experimental haiku may be criticized for not being haikooey enough, this poem references season, has a clear cut, and is written in one line: all of which are the hallmarks of a Japanese haiku. It defies an easy reading, but the complications placed on the reader are inviting. Autumn colors are easy to imagine, but “half autumn color”? I particularly like the use of “and” at the end, giving us a sense of interruption—a sense that a lot of what a haiku often points to is outside the poem itself. I have seen this technique used before, but with the last word circling around and being completed by the first half that precedes the full stop. (Period.) In this case our saccadic eye movements find no easy conclusion in sight, no matter how many times we scan back and forth. In doing so, however, one cannot help notice the rhyme of “hand,” “land,” and “and.” A thought-provoking poem that warrants time.

Clayton Beach walks the line:

This ku is rife with a sense of the liminal; it is not full autumn color that greets us, but half. This sense of the in-between, unfinished and incomplete carries through to the end. The speaker says “come take my hand,” a warm, intimate invitation, but then the latter half gives us the location, “the ghost land” and the invitation breaks off into an unfinished fragment. Is the speaker meant to be a spirit from the past, their invitation coming in fragments, is this ghost land a literal place? Or is it merely a dramatic hyperbole of the desolation we feel in Autumn as summer slips away and the life seems to be leaching from the landscape around us?

I chose this ku for discussion this week because it is a great example of the sense of play with kire (cutting) that I advocated in last week’s commentary

on Chiyo-ni. Even though it is presented in a single line, this ku provides us with two clear indications of cutting.

The first, a period, is perhaps the most severe method of cutting we have available to us in the English language. This provides a full stop, and we are left pondering the kigo, “half autumn color.” The period prevents us from any temptation to elide the cut and fuse the two parts of the ku, for a comma, semi-colon, ellipsis or even nothing at all might imply that the speaker was addressing the autumn color:

half autumn color, come take my hand in the ghost land and

Here, personifying autumn takes away the literal implication of an actual ghost land, making the landscape a more metaphorical journey of seasonal desolation. But the period separates the concepts, inviting juxtaposition but refusing a blending of disparate parts.

The second cut is an unfinished sentence. As I mentioned regarding the kireji “kana,” leaving an implication of an unfinished, longer poem is a haiku technique that is seldom used in the English language. Here, it is quite effective, we are left to supply our own activity or conclusion to the invitation. Is it “Come take my hand in the ghost land and we will gather asphodel?” or “Come take my hand in the ghost land and we will hold each other once again,” whatever it is that most resonates with the reader will become the heart of the poem. Here, the unsaid is the most important part of the ku, the most personal, a hushed secret between a literary specter and the reader.

Whose ghost does it bring to mind, what unfinished business might they have with us? This is a haiku of negative space, of the unseen, unsaid and demonstrates the strength of indeterminacy in poetry. It is a wonderful demonstration of the use of punctuation in English language haiku to provide a sense of cutting, and of haiku moving beyond a simple juxtaposition into a poetry of multiple cuts and negative space.

Alan Summer’s lets the genie out of the bottle:

The intriguing haikai “piece” makes more sense syntactically if you read the other three lines in the *Bones* journal issue.

Arthur C. Clarke after six thousand years cicada

half autumn color. Come take my hand in the ghost land and
those selves abandoned walk the dry shores of Mars
the game where we break each others fingers in spring

True the overall syntax is not as natural as that of a straight piece of prose, creative fiction or non-fiction, and it is most definitely poetry, beguiling and beautiful.

Haiku could be said to be a middle of a spoken sentence where the eavesdropper has just a few words to guess the beginning and ending of a conversation. I would love to be witness to someone attempting to decipher this as an eavesdropper or a poet.

The piece as prose is fascinating, and the opening line whether intended as a standalone contemporary haiku, or the first line of the sequence, continues to enrapture me in its use of consonance and assonance and other poetic devices. We seem to have two sentences in an attempt at a normal grammar construction except for the deliberate omission of a period after 'spring'.

I feel it neatly defies a definition of haikai poetry or rather which genre or 'sub-genre'. The fact of the matter, perhaps, is that once Masaoka Shiki (1867 – 1902) used the hardly known or used term of 'haiku' to forge something, around the 1870s, that might last hopefully into the 20th Century, it was always going to be the genie in the bottle. First of all the bottle, plus genie, would drift the sea currents just as a message in a bottle is surmised to do, be it urban myth or no. Secondly, once that bottle hit land, and many 'lands' at that, the genie was always going to finally escape. Two world wars, and numerous other global conflicts forcing social change, and the genie has skipped around both Japan and almost every other country in the world. Many poets, along with that genie, have taken what Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) said about the earlier 'hokku' and various haikai verses, and followed his entreaty to heart, that of (paraphrasing)

“do not copy me like two halves of a melon.”

As the Japanese love their folklore, myths, and science fiction, and this often appears in contemporary Japanese haiku, it feels fitting that Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* is perhaps alluded to by David Boyer: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Martian_Chronicles

David Boyer has done this with aplomb, and I’m proud to be a co-founding editor of *Bones Journal*, and that it continues to bring forward challenging and non-generic work such as this.

Peter Newton finds solace:

The construction of this one-liner is sentence-like. Yet it is also spliced as if to short-circuit our usual way of reading from left to right. Quite inventive. The poem is an invitation to join the poet in his quest across the “ghost land.” The reference to autumn captures a certain natural ending to things, an ennui, but we soon realize that there are no endings or beginnings in this poem. The structure tells us so. Change is all there is. All we can do in the face of change is hold hands and move on toward whatever comes next.

I could also be reading into this poem what I want to feel in the current state of U.S. affairs– which is hope.

We find solace where we need to.

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

REVIRALS 121

turning crows
the distance smokes
a yellow tractor

— Brendon Kent (*Sonic Boom 3*, 2015)

Jacob Salzer recalls Steinbeck:

I've read that crows are very intelligent. The fact they are turning in this haiku seems to imply that they are turning away from humans, and/or perhaps some form of environmental destruction via the tractor. The 2nd line "the distance smokes" seems to remind us of a dangerous gap that exists between some humans and the earth, and what happens when some people leave behind significant scars, and ignore the damage that has been done. The word "smokes" adds another layer, as it seems to imply a lack of clear understanding, or a distorted point of view.

This haiku also reminds me of Steinbeck's famous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and how the tractors in that novel replaced farmers, and traditional farming methods, as the industry and banks forced farmers and their families off their land. And yet, the man in the tractor, who has no real connection to the earth, stands his ground, and speaks of the tractor as a means to make a living, to feed his family. So, we have this paradox of a tractor symbolizing productivity, and wealth—it is a means to feed a family—and yet it is simultaneously completely destroying people's way of life, and forcing families to leave a place they once called home. The tractor is providing jobs, and feeding some people, but it is also forcing others into long-distance travel, sickness, and ultimately starvation, and even death. Thus, the tractor could simultaneously be seen as a symbol of both power, and corruption.

Could the smoke be from a forest fire? Or perhaps it's coming from the tractor itself? Is the tractor being swallowed by its own flames? There is some mystery to this haiku, drawing the reader in, yet it's grounded in vivid imagery with the crows, and the stark, yellow tractor, and the smoke.

From another angle, I see the smoke is not coming from the tractor itself, or from perhaps a dense fog, or smoke from flames, etc., but is rather coming from the mind of a human. In other words, it seems thoughts are like smoke. In that regard, the distance in the mind seems to signify reaching the edge of understanding. It is the edge of the English Language. It is the edge between the known and the unknown.

Here is an old poem of mine that was conjured up by reading Brendon's haiku:

“Wandering Eyes”

How far can we look from where we stand?
here and now through these wandering eyes
can they escape their own reflection?

blending with grey skies
waiting for clear eyes to see
past the transient rain
falling into a vast blue sea

the observation of another world
reveals a new one
through a new pair of eyes
you may see yourself in motion
but only in your wandering eyes
who knows what a dreamer might see

David Jacobs is a satisfied reader:

The near perfect juxtaposition between creature and object in this poem reminded me of William Carlos Williams's famous 'red wheelbarrow':

So much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Like Williams's, Kent's poem moves to its conclusion with a similar fluidity of expression, the colour of the tractor as important to its structure as well as to any meaning the reader might impart.

The originality of the second and third lines leaves the reader nowhere to go but to his or her own imagination, but what better place to be? Whether the tractor itself is alight or something around it or beyond, or the colour is created by some trick of sunlight or haze, or is simply as it is, everything is satisfyingly left in the reader's hands.

And then we come back to the 'turning crows' on which the final lines are dependent for their ultimate strength and which, chronologically, first drew the author to the scene he eventually described.

Bob Aspey gets corvine:

On my route to work I pass two colonies of corvids. In truth, I don't know the difference between a crow and a rook, except that I think rooks congregate in crowds. So the colonies are probably rookeries, but to me all those big, black birds are crows.

As the days wax and wane, so at different times I pass the birds at dawn or dusk, just as they leave or return to their nests – a clattering swirl of argumentative neighbours. As well as having their own daily rhythms, the crows are attuned to the seasonal work of the local farmers. So, as they

plough and sow and harvest, their tractors and combines are followed by crowds of black dots, searching the ground for whatever has been turned up as the earth is disturbed. Occasionally the birds are startled and rise as a dark cloud, cawing, complaining to one another.

This was the image evoked for me by Kent's haiku: a tractor moving across a field, followed by a cloud of black dots as if the tractor is turning up the crows themselves, the crows using the tractor to find food, just as the farmer is using it as a tool to grow our food.

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

REsVIRALS 122

All the time I pray to Buddha
I keep on
killing mosquitoes

— Kobayashi Issa (1763 – 1828) (*The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson and Issa*, ed. R Hass, The Ecco Press, 1994)

Garry Eaton lets the current take him:

A comic, common sense, but conflicted point of view about karma, self-preservation and the Buddhist injunction to practice reverence for life. It is a classic demonstration of a typical Issa dichotomy in its embrace of a suffering world and its devotion to reaching the Pureland of the compassionate one, Amida Buddha. In its deeper implication, the haiku shows us a man fighting against the current, but feeling he is nevertheless being carried relentlessly downstream by the struggle to survive in the material world. The only resolution is in accepting and laughing at the ironies.

Lynne Rees presents her ideas on the present:

I've been told (but have never been able to accurately source it) that Arthur Koestler said, 'true understanding involves transcending the barrier of paradox.' And that idea seems to be the backcloth to this haiku by Issa, how he subscribed to the non-violence at the heart of Buddhist thinking and behaviour yet could not live up to the first of the five precepts that all Buddhists should follow: 'Avoid killing, or harming any living thing.' Because there's no wriggle room to say that mosquitoes, annoying or not, aren't living things. How could he call himself a Buddhist but also act in a way that betrayed his core beliefs? Does that make him a hypocrite? On the logical surface of the argument, yes. But I imagine we are all culpable of what could be described as self-betrayals. Are we Christians whipped into road-rage rather than turning the other cheek? And what about us vegetarians who like leather boots? Or writing tutors who convince our

students that daily writing practice is the only way but haven't followed that advice ourselves for quite some time?

'Walk the talk' has become a popular expression, the antithesis of 'Don't do what I do, do what I say.' But is it even remotely possible for us imperfect, unpredictable, contrary human beings to always do that?

Perhaps Issa is saying he is not perfect, that he never will be. Perhaps he is saying that the only thing he can do is to be aware of himself, present to the who and what he is and does. Perhaps that act of being present, of facing up to who we are and what we do, of accepting but not judging, creates a space for slowly becoming our more authentic selves. Perhaps that's how we transcend the paradox.

David G. Lanoue looks at the juxtapositions of Issa's flies and Buddhas:

Since Robert Hass admittedly could not read Japanese, basing all of his English versions of haiku on translations by R. H. Blyth, it's anyone's guess which exact poem by Issa this is supposed to be. Issa wrote several haiku juxtaposing the recital of the *nembutsu* ("All Praise to Amida Buddha") with mosquitoes either attacking or being swatted at.

For example:

なむああと大口明けば藪蚊哉
namu aa to ôkuchi akeba yabu ka kana
while praising Buddha
with wide-open mouth . . .
a mosquito

. . . humorously implying that the mosquito has flown in?

Or:

なむあみだ仏の方より鳴蚊哉
namu amida butsu no kata yori naku ka kana

from the direction
of “all praise to Amida Buddha!”
a mosquito’s buzz

It might even be (as editor of *re:Virals* Danny suggested to me in an email):

あばれ蚊に数珠をふりふり回向哉
abare ka ni juzu wo furi-furi ekô kana
swatting prayer beads
at a pesky mosquito . . .
memorial service

If Hass is creating a version of the latter haiku, he has unfortunately removed some important and vivid elements: the prayer beads (along with the silly and impious action of using them as a mosquito-swatter), and the memorial service, which hints of a common death for all, humans and insects. A brilliant tragicomic poem has thereby been reduced to a mediocre one through “translation.”

Ajaya Mahala plays a zero-sum game:

The haiku aptly depicts the duality in our existence. Buddha enunciated the principle of ‘Ahimsa’ or non-violence. He preached for shunning of violence in any form against even the smallest of the creatures. The haiku gives the picture of meditation by the poet where mosquitoes create obstruction by biting. This compels the poet to swat the mosquitoes to death.

This brings to fore the conflict between the end and the means. Can there be immoral means to a noble end? Why all these genocides and massacres in the name of religion? Is there some weight in the statement that the means can never be bad if the ultimate goal is noble? Or that if the effect of good deeds outweigh the effect of bad deeds, then the net result will only be good? According to Hindu philosophy, good and bad deeds never cancel each other out and one has to undergo the repercussions of their actions separately. While human life is a common cauldron of a variety of actions, the trial of

each action shall be held in a watertight compartment, and each action will have its bearing on life.

Even if we forget these interpretations, we will come to understand that we have, throughout our life, only played a zero-sum game — that is, all our actions have led us nowhere. In a way, we have robbed Peter all the way to pay to Paul.

Thus, the haiku has a message embedded in it — big pluses in life are of no value if there are also big minuses to offset them. It is better to have smaller good acts to your credit with no evil act detrimental to the existence of other creatures.

Michael O' Brien finds humour:

The poem might offer multiple readings.

Firstly the hypocrisy or inconsistency of human existence. Most of us want to do good and consciously try to but if we're honest with ourselves for just a moment, how many us knowingly live unsustainable lifestyles and fall into traps such as keeping up with the joneses? A lot of the time everything from our dinner plate to our petrol munching vehicles contradicts our best intentions.

There's also a reading of inevitability or fatalism, a somewhat less severe understanding of the prior reading, which we could interpret as: we're only human and we can never get over that. We eat, we sleep, and occasionally we kill mosquitos.

From reading Issa's extensive list of work, humour is often close by and that's why affording any of his works a humourous reading is valuable (except the one's about dead kids — there's usually no punch line with poems involving dead children). So if you laugh at the scene of a serene diligent Buddhist with their legs all wound up like a pretzel and their back straight like a poker, flipping their lid over a little mosquito, there is definitely humour to be had. Personally I read a little of interpretations two and three — the pathos of human nature with a little dash of humour; life can be painful sometimes but if we can't laugh at the absurdity of it all, it can be too much. Let's just do our best and not worry if we mindlessly kill a mosquito now and again.

Praniti Gulyani feels the vibes:

On reading this haiku by Issa, I was reminded of rosary beads almost instantly. In today's fast-paced world, I presume all of us have a rosary, sliding away, bead by bead beneath our finger cushions. The beads simultaneously symbolize our problems as well as the act of superficial devotion. This haiku beautifully captures human insensitivity as well. It speaks about how humans tend to vent their frustrations out on those less fortunate and those who cannot speak.

While praying to Buddha, we mutter our frustrations, problems, and agonies to ourselves. Through this haiku, Issa shows us how vulnerable we are. Our prayers are punctuated by the killing of mosquitoes. Buddha is an icon of peace and enlightenment. He is a tender, warm glow upon the cloudiness of one's mind. As we push the beads of the rosary forward, our thoughts begin trailing, depleting the intensity of our devotion. A whirlwind of images rushes through my mind as I think of the mere shadow of a pair of mosquito wings struggling — till it all gradually merges to form one single vibration, the lingering note from where it all began.

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

REVIRALS 123

harvest moon —
I circle the pond
all night

— Matsuo Bashō (Tr. D. Lanoue)

Hansha Teki gets illuminant:

This haiku brings to mind the memory of a peak experience from my youth. At the time I was looking after oyster beds in a very remote area located on the shores of the Kaipara Harbour in New Zealand. There was no artificial light to lessen the impact of each night's darkness.

On the night of a startlingly clear harvest moon I rowed my dinghy out onto the calm moonlit waters of the bay. In that light, accompanied only by the water lapping against my drifting boat, I experienced a private, lonely, personal illumination or revelation, akin to religious ecstasy. Time and space lost meaning while I became filled with a feeling of being at one with self and creation, effortlessly and fully alive, fully in control of all my faculties, free of fear and doubt, brimming with a creative overflow of being so completely at one with the present moment. Energy and warmth seemed to emanate from the centre of my being to the rest of my body.

Was the night of the harvest moon in 1686 on which Bashō hosted poetry gathering at his hut a night like mine? He and his party too took a boat out onto the water. They rowed to a quieter part of the Sumida River with the intention of composing haiku evoking the moonlit scene around them. I suspect that Bashō remembered his spring poetry gathering earlier the same year at which he composed his peak experience frog haiku. Is this why the river became worded as a pond? “Circling the pond” also suggests to me the image also of wolves circling their prey. Is the poet seeking to re-experience his “mizu no oto” moment, the moon's illumination?

名月や池をめぐりて夜もすがら

meigetsu ya / ike o megurite / yomosugara

bright-moon ! / pond circling / all-night
(Autumn: harvest moon. 1686.)

harvest moon—
I circle the pond
all night

(tr. David Lanoue)

I am drawn to personalise the haiku thus:

illuminant moon—
circling the pond
through the night

Editor's note: The word for word translation of *meigetsu* used by Barnhill (and cited above by Hansha Teki) uses the expression “bright-moon.” Just for clarity, I'll add that the first kanji *mei* can mean a variety of things, among them: noted, distinguished, reputable, and so on. The second kanji, *getsu*, is the moon. This renowned moon is, of course, the brightly shining harvest moon.

Jeanne Cook shares her lunar musings:

Did this night pass quickly or slowly?
Sometimes one views the beautiful and does not want to take one's eyes off
the object. One does not wish to miss any of the fleeting beauty, even if it
may feel a bit too prolonged. The attention wanders; one gets tired. Basho
alludes to the challenges of moon viewing in this haiku:

Clouds now and then
give a soul some respite from
moon-gazing—behold
(tr. B.L. Einbond)

Or in another translation:

Lovely moon on high—
but when clouds obscure it
necks enjoy the rest
(tr. William Cohen)

Given such human frailties, the all-night circling of Basho could have seemed very long indeed.

Yet the translation of Harold Henderson gives a clue that maybe the night didn't seem that long at all:

Harvest Moon
around the pond I wander
and the night is gone.

He provides a literal translation of *yo-mo-sugara* as “night-already-over.” This doesn't sound like a long night, but one that went quickly, over almost as soon as it began.

A “night-already-over” gives us a clue to yet another approach to the seeming duration of this haiku. The “moon” is the subject of an entire chapter in Zen Master Dogen Kigen's (1200-1253) classic work *Shobogenzo*. Dogen quotes the Buddha:

“the true dharma-body...like the empty sky...manifests itself in various forms, like the moon in water.”

The phrase “moon-in-water” presents, according to Dogen, the “actual, nondual (ultimate) reality of moon-water itself—its essential ‘thusness/suchness.’” Perhaps we may deduce the total dissolution of time as Basho views “moon-in-water” in a “night already over.”

Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water
The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken
—Dogen

A haiku by Buson also suggests a liberating enlightenment:

escaped the nets
escaped the ropes—
moon on water

Perhaps Basho's night, circling the pond, was experienced neither with time going slowly nor with time going fast, but rather, as a night of non-duality, a night of timelessness.

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

RE:VIRALS 125

[Editor's Note: There is no re:Virals 124.]

in a room
with no windows
drawing stars

— ai li (*still* two one, 1998)

Marion Clarke sends us a comment from an office with a window:

Initially this suggested that the narrator is attempting to escape a form of claustrophobia. However, the notion that he or she is “drawing stars” is interesting. Are they literal or imaginary stars? Perhaps it is an astronomer talking to an audience or a university lecturer drawing on an iPad to add detail to a presentation on the cosmos?

On the other hand, this could be about a person unused to being indoors who has ended up working 9-5 in a windowless office, doodling until home time!

Bob Aspey meditates on the meaning:

There is some evidence that doodling aids memory, possibly by letting the doodler stay in the moment by preventing the mind from wandering. Some promote doodling as a form of meditation, a tool to support mindfulness exercises.

And so we have ai li's poem. Perhaps it is a meditation room, no windows to prevent external distraction. Inside: simple decoration and a few pieces of comfortable furniture; nothing to excite, just calming colours. Inside, too, someone sitting quietly, meditating.

But even in a windowless, colourless room, there are distractions. The mind wanders, constantly swirling away on the stream of consciousness, ever having to be reined back from the day's problems, always trying to cling to that still, calm spot.

Perhaps the practitioner in ai li's room is trying this as a way of limiting internal distractions, perhaps doodling freestyle, perhaps colouring in pre-drawn stars. Either way, the poem carries a sense of peace about the process:

in a room
with no windows
drawing stars

Clayton Beach explores the narrative:

This poem is an excellent example of storytelling with great economy. ai li is the inventor of the cherita, a 6-line narrative poem in the haiku/tanka tradition, but even her haiku are imbued with a sense of micro-fiction narrative reminiscent of her signature form.

ai li leaves us with just the essential details, just enough to pique our interest and ask us to construct a story that explains the ku. The “room with no windows” suggests imprisonment, or at the very least claustrophobia, and the unmentioned subject allows us to fill in the blanks as to who is in this dismal place. Is it a child in an abusive or loveless home? Is it a woman stuck in a terrible marriage? Or is it a prisoner sitting on their cot, dreaming of freedom? Confinement dominates the atmosphere. Depending on the reader, any one of these solutions might satisfy the image and add resonance, or perhaps it is something else entirely.

Finally, the action, “drawing stars,” signifies a sense of hope in the darkest hour, a yearning for freedom during oppression, wanting to see the beauty of nature and the infinite, divine cosmos from a place of uninspiring blandness and restriction. Perhaps it is even a metaphor for the soul longing to see the divine in a world that so often assaults us with the soulless and banal. That the subject of the poem is seeking and creating what their heart desires, even when it is unseen and distant, offers us hope and suggests that what we seek is always within reach, if only we turn inward.

Lynne Reese appreciates the generosity:

There are two things that immediately strike me about ai li's haiku:

1. A strong sense of containment, perhaps even imprisonment, from the image of a room with no windows.
2. The concrete images at the end of each line – room, windows, stars – that anchor me to the real world.

The idea of containment/imprisonment is a subjective response; the room could as easily be a cellar where someone has chosen to be. But surely there's a sense of longing, or aware, in the third line, a longing for the exterior world that has been denied, for the night sky, for beauty and peace and freedom, that reinforces that idea for me.

But if this is about imprisonment why don't I feel any distress or sense of restriction? Perhaps because of those three concrete words at the end of each line. Poets place (or should place) words at the ends of lines for deliberate and conscious reasons. And these do feel consciously placed. Room. Window. Stars. I am in a room. I look out of a window. I see stars.

The poet, or the narrator in this poem, has allowed me to experience the night sky regardless of the limitations of their personal situation. Can there be greater generosity than this? To offer the gift of beauty from a place where beauty has been denied?

The poet ai li discusses her "spirit of place":

in a room was written in one breath.

I write all my short form poems in this way, without drafting, because it enables me to tap into the very essence of the moment.

This haiku empowered me at a time in my life when I needed to find faith and much needed optimism. The 8 words serve as a reminder to myself about how I was able to overcome a situation I happened to find myself in. By using lateral thinking, I wrote myself out of inner captivity into the magical world of genius loci.

My selected haiku remains close to my heart and soul and I would like to thank Danny Blackwell for his sensitivity of selection.

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

REVIRALS 126

long before I came
long after I leave
blossoming pear

— Johnny Baranski (*Lilliput Review* 191)

Marietta McGregor finds humility here:

Haiku that touch the heart often have a strong sense of wabi-sabi, and that is certainly the case with Johnny Baranski's poem. The poet is present in the moment, looking upward into the glorious froth of a pear tree in full flower. At that instant, he is struck by the past, present, and future, simultaneously. Beginning and ending, as all living things must, will happen without our having any control over the time and place. Andrew Juniper, in *Wabi-Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence* describes wabi-sabi thus: "an intuitive appreciation of a transient beauty in the physical world that reflects the irreversible flow of life in the spiritual world. It is an understated beauty (. . .) an aesthetic sensibility that finds melancholic beauty in the impermanence of all things." Baranski's poem is an appreciation of the short-lived beauty of the world. The haiku reflects humility, an acute sense of our small role in the long play of death and renewal. It conveys the melancholy of reflection, while at the same time we feel the poet is at peace with his place in things, change as they must and will. There is the somehow deeply comforting sense that nothing lasts, and yet everything goes on. We are not being passed by, but are merely passing through the continuum of existence. The poem, with its deep sense of wabi-sabi, reminds us of our place in a fragile world. Tomorrow, the pear blossom will be blown away on the wind. Johnny Baranski is no longer with us, but his haiku remains. The pear will continue to blossom.

Linda Weir is motivated by the ancient force:

While haiku is short, it can express so much in so few words. Here Jonny Baranski gives us a 'carpe diem' poem, reminding the reader how fleeting life

is as each of our lives is like the blossoming of a pear—beautiful yet short. And that the force of life is also long, while each being (tree or person, etc.) has a short existence, life itself is an ancient force. That living things were here long before this moment of seeing a pear tree in bloom and will remain long after the poet, reader, and tree are gone. Get out there and experience the beauty—seize the day!

Clayton Beach finds this ku to be a fitting elegy:

I chose this ku by Johnny Baranski to celebrate his memory. He passed away late January of 2018. Johnny was one of my first mentors in haiku and we quickly became friends. He was a core member of the Portland Haiku Group, the kukai I belong to, and a frequent contributor to many prominent journals in the world of English language haiku.

This ku is ironic in that it takes a sign of the ephemeral—the spring blossoms of a pear tree—and juxtaposes them with the idea of the eternal and unwavering, implied by the focus of the ku on the blossoming pear as tree, which is there both “long before” and “long after.”

Read literally, the ku could merely mean that the speaker stopped to admire the blossoms and passed by. However, in the context of death and the fleeting nature of human life, something long associated with the blossoms of flowering trees in Japanese poetry and the haiku tradition, this could be read as saying that the speaker’s life is more fleeting even than the blossoms, or at least, like the blossoms, our lives come and go, while the tree is ever constant and undying.

The ancient tree could be taken to represent God, the soul, Buddha nature, Gaia, the universe or whatever concept of eternal life force that the reader believes in or chooses to see, while like the blossoms that come and go, our human lives bloom from the earth and return to it after ever so brief a time—ashes to ashes, dust to dust. I’m not aware that Johnny was able to write any jisei, or “death poem,” but I found this work of his a fitting elegy to the man himself.

Johnny had a deep Catholic faith and it comes through in his poetry from time to time. He graduated from Loyola University with a degree in English

Literature, and quickly became involved with the Catholic pacifist resistance to nuclear proliferation and the Vietnam War, which eventually landed him in prison for non-violent protests. Imprisonment, redemption, and faith were frequent topics of his poetry, in addition to the usual subjects of haiku like the seasons and nature, but he also had a lighter, more playful side, often pushing the envelop of the haiku far into the bawdy reaches of the senryu tradition. I will always remember and admire his humor, kindness and dedication to the haiku form. Johnny was a genuine haijin and wonderful friend.

John Levy appreciates the sacrifice:

Reading this haiku the same week I read about Johnny Baranski's death makes the poem especially moving for me. I learned of his death from the February 2018 issue of John Martone's online magazine *otata*, which is dedicated to Baranski and Baranski is the lead-off poet in the issue with ten poems (and four of the ten refer to jail or prison).

I sometimes thought I should contact Baranski because I, too, have written about jail and prison. As an assistant county public defender in Tucson for over 18 years I would guess that I visited the local jail at least 5,000 times because I visited clients at the jail almost every working day, frequently making two trips a day and sometimes returning at night. Before being a public defender I had worked as a solo criminal defense lawyer for several years and visited clients in prison. So I felt, and still feel, a kinship with Baranski's many compassionate and remarkable poems about the experiences of those who have been locked into those buildings. Unlike him, however, I always only visited, never stayed overnight.

I didn't contact him, however. Now I regret it. I wish I had at least written him a fan letter.

I didn't know why he was so familiar with jail and prison. From his poems I felt certain that he had spent time in such institutions and I wondered if it was because of some crime he had committed, maybe in his youth.

Of course I was wrong. I only found out the reason this week. His obituary in *The Oregonian* states:

“Many of his poems were written while serving time in prison for acts of conscience including nonviolent resistance to war and the Trident nuclear weapon system. He lived his life with humility, friendship and love in service of the Gospel of Christ. A devout Catholic, Johnny served the poor for many years as a member of the Catholic Worker Community in Portland.”

Probably many readers of *re:Virals* knew Baranski and about the actions that led to his arrests and imprisonment. So perhaps only a few readers of this feature on the THF website did not know about his admirable devotion to the anti-war movement and his protests of the nuclear weapon system.

The poem under consideration steps in and out of time, in and out of eternity. Just as each of us has done and will do, along with the pear tree and its blossoms.

The particular form of repetition, anaphora, is not unusual in haiku in English. What makes the poem moving (literally, in this case, moving through time as well as emotionally touching) is the sense of authenticity. I imagine the poet near or under a blossoming pear tree and experiencing a sense of time and timelessness along with a fellowship with the tree and its blossoms. George Oppen’s “Five Poems About Poetry” begins with a poem entitled “The Gesture.” Here is the poem in its entirety:

The question is how does one hold an apple
Who likes apples
And how does one handle
Filth? The question is
How does one hold something
In the mind which he intends
To grasp and how does the salesman
Hold a bauble he intends
To sell? The question is
When will there not be a hundred
Poets who mistake that gesture
For a style.

Baranski's poem could not have been written by a person trying to sell a bauble. Nor could his other poems have been written by someone with the intention of passing off a doodad or gimcrack. He is one of those poets who did not make the mistake Oppen condemns. And not only did he write remarkable poems that make clear his genuine dedication—and work—to grasp and to value, his activities with the peace movement demonstrate that he was fully committed to a life of conscience and was willing to make enormous sacrifices.

He will be missed. I hope and trust that long after he has passed on his poems will be read.

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

RE:VIRALS 127

the sky's blue gong an orange in my hand
— Peter Yovu (*Imago*, 2016)

Dan Schwerin is thankful:

This is one of those haiku that makes you want to grow up and write haiku. Like all excellent haiku, this one by Peter Yovu is more than rational and offers multivalent resonance. This blue gonging sky announces, almost proclaims, an orange, the sun, the day, this day is in your hand—ahh—but it is also not in your hand. The orange is what we have now, but it is not in your hand, nor is the sun—and yet it feeds and is sustaining this now of ours. Blue gong good people: this is a great haiku. Thank you, Peter Yovu, *re:Virals* and the Haiku Foundation for bringing this forum for our learning and appreciation.

Lynne Rees cheers:

I don't think Yovu could have packed any more into this haiku. Colour and sound. The human experience and the natural world. Distance and proximity. And the beautiful simplicity of concrete language that injects it with vibrancy and authenticity and communicates an experience we can all recognise and share.

Add to that the use of colour as adjective and noun, the onomatopoeia of 'gong' and the almost-eye rhyme with 'orange,' as well as the monostich form that encourages us to experience this moment in one celebratory hurrah, and this is a haiku that makes me feel good to be alive on this day in the world. A day when that orange could almost be the sun sitting in my own small palm.

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

REVIRALS 128

first warm day
the ground
gives a little

—John Stevenson (*quiet enough*, Red Moon Press, 2004)

Danny Blackwell shares in the joy:

There is a long tradition of writing about the “first” in Japanese haiku—first snow; first sky, or dream, of the new year; first whatever, of this and that . . . and so on. Usually this is done with compound nouns using the word for first—“hatsu” (初)—followed by the object to which it refers. This haiku by John Stevenson seems to fit in well with this tradition. There is a sense that the first warm day (one might suppose in transition from winter to spring) alters our perception of the world—in this case giving the impression that the ground “gives a little.” That is to say, the world seems softer, easier—more receptive. It could be more literal, however, and refer to the ground actually becoming softer due to the phenomenological changes from one season to another—the ground being more grassy and soft, for example (instead of cold, hard mud).

I like this poem for its subtlety. It can be read in the most Japanese tradition and fulfill some of the essential requisites purists tend to clamour for: the syntax creates a natural break (kire), separating line one from line two and three. And the line “first warm day” functions as a seasonal reference. But, more importantly, it says something. It is not a mere, lifeless, ascetic, sketch. It is not some cold, objective observation. It speaks to the joy of spring, without being explicit or having any strong authorial voice to tell us what to think or feel, and the poem allows us, therefore, to share in that joy as if it were our own. And who among us has not, at one time or another, lived this experience?

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

REVIRALS 120

PECES VOLADORES

Al golpe del oro solar
estalla en astillas el vidrio del mar.

FLYING FISH

The solar gold clash
smashes into splinters the sea's glass.

— José Juan Tablada, *El jarro de flores* (1922), Tr. Danny Blackwell)

Dan Schwerin wants room to manoeuvre:

This feels overstated. Very little *ma* or space for my taste.

Lynne Rees also gets claustrophobic:

The English feels overstated. (I know it's translated quite faithfully from the Spanish but I don't really know how that comes across to native speakers.) But everything is explained here, the words explicitly directing me. And this response isn't because of any expectations of haiku. I'd have the same response if this was presented as a short poem, or even part of a poem. I don't need solar and gold.

I don't need smashes and splinters. But I do like 'splinters the sea's glass.' But these comments apart, for me the three lines don't rise above vivid description, a scene captured/remembered. There's no space for me within the poem and no poetic closure that allows me to travel further and reflect and expand on it through my own experience. It is what it is. An end in itself.

Clayton Beach reads Tablada within his historical context:

This is one where the musicality of the original is lost in translation and the poem suffers as a result. “Al golpe del oro solar” has a nice alliteration to it with the repeated o’s and the ol/el/ol. It’s a very spacious and sensuous line in the way it rolls off the tongue. “At the strike of the sun’s gold” might capture the falling cadence of it a bit better. Reminds me almost of Tennyson’s eagle (“like a thunderbolt, he falls”). In the second line, “estalla en astillas” also has a sonic resonance that is lost in English. If I’m reading it correctly there’s a slight cut through disjunctive syntax between lines one and two that has been smoothed over in English.

This poem comes from 1922, Tablada was the first non-Japanese to write a collection comprised entirely of haiku, and thus beats Kerouac by several decades in terms of being the first prolific writer of haiku outside of the native language.

Thus, Tablada wrote this without the aid of Blyth, without the nearly 100 years of haiku theory and trial and error that others now benefits from in terms of having a template to draw from; trail blazing is never as clean as driving on paved streets.

I think there’s also a touch of chauvinism in too harsh of a critique of this poem, in terms of the line of thought that “that’s not the way we do haiku.” It’s interesting to me to see differing interpretations of the form in other languages, as English language haiku orthodoxy can get so self-righteous at times as to attack the legitimacy of contemporary haiku in Japanese, it isn’t surprising that this poem would raise some hackles with its unconventional approach.

Nevertheless, if I find Tablada interesting, but not always fully satisfying, I still have to give credit where it is due. I think it’s better poetry than any of the hokku Pound, Lowell or Cummings were doing up to that point, though I still think Steven’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” poems are as good as early non-Japanese haiku gets. English language haiku would take another, what, 60-70 years to have the courage of playing with the language and breaking the mold this much while still calling the results haiku?

Ajaya Mahala finds magic here:

I somehow see the magic, the observation, though limited to sensory perception of one kind—that is, visual—gives us a lot of gladdening items to fill the visual platter: flying fish; the splintered, golden surface of the sea; movement; clash . . . Too many objects do not clutter, rather they effectively render a slice of life in the turbulent sea.

Alan Summers takes the bait:

Okay, I'll bite.

I didn't like this at first, but in a historical context it deserves its place. Danny said in his email to me: "I'm interested to see what people's reactions are to this rather

unorthodox Latin-American haiku." In the context of its time, and he did have haiku in his first but lost novel *China Boat*, I don't see this as an unorthodox attempt at haiku. In the early 20th Century a lot of attempts were titles followed by a duostich or couplet. I quite like an alternative first line of 'a bruise of sun.'

Haiku continues to warp and weft, morph and twist, evolve, add and drop approaches and variations etc. . . . etc. . . . The author was perhaps the first to add haiku to a novel, before Jack Kerouac, as it was written in 1902. Sadly the only manuscript was destroyed. He is an early pioneer, and deserves his place in the history of haiku outside Japan.

Of course I don't see this as a haiku, but an early attempt. It feels too 'complete,' but lacking in that intangible fullness that an incomplete haiku poem can achieve. It doesn't gather the power of *The Fish* by Elizabeth Bishop or *The Fish* by Mary Oliver, because it doesn't continue on its journey of fishiness and the sun smashed against the hard surface of the water. It does resonate a little for me, but I wonder if it could have become an untitled tercet instead? e.g.

a bruise of sun
smashes into splinters . . .
the sea is glass

It still feels clunky, and is still a one-image poem, can it include the title somehow? e.g.

flying fish:
a bruise of sun smashes
into splinters

It still feels awkward and ‘dated,’ which even hokku and other early haikai verses by Basho; Buson; Chiyo-ni; and Issa never do. It is worthy of its place in history, both in general/global development, as well as by a Hispanic author, reminding us that haiku is not just Japanese or English.

Daniel-san defends himself:

As is my wont, I find myself adding a word or two on my translation. Obviously I have taken certain liberties in order to generate in the English version a rhyme, and thereby create a similar effect to the one that a Spanish-speaker would get when reading “solar” and “mar,” at the end of each line. As the poem includes the word “glass” alongside a reference to the beating/hitting of the sun, I chose the word “smash,” which may not be the closest word in the literal sense, but I think is a fair trade for the payoff of having a rhyme and getting an idea of the cadence in the original. And I think, overall, the rhythm of the poem is relatively unaltered in terms of the beats, so to speak.

Clayton felt that the alliteration was lost in the line “Al golpe del oro solar” and, while that may be true, I think that the musicality of “estalla en astillas” is well-matched with the equally sibilant “smashes into splinters” in my translation, the two phrases also maintaining more or less the rhythmic beats. (Although I admittedly have zero objectivity and welcome the criticism nevertheless.)

I’ve consulted other translations of Hispanic haiku with rhymes (which are common) and find that the more literal renditions completely miss the musicality, which at times, in Tablada for example, appear to be more of an active compositional motivating factor at times than content, which, as the

comments above prove, led some poets to create poems that some would consider have superfluous elements, as a result of going for something more, let's say, "poetic."

Anyone wanting to know more, would do well to consult Ty Hadmann's poet profile of Tablada in the Haiku Foundation archives. And also Charles Trumbull's *One Hundred Bridges*.

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

RE:VIRALS 130

nil by mouth—
peeling and dicing
the moon

—Helen Buckingham (*water on the moon*, 2010)

Alan Summers sympathizes:

The haiku is from Helen Buckingham's collection *water on the moon* 2010 and is one of many classic modern haiku (now available as a PDF from The Haiku Foundation's Digital Library). It could be said that Helen is both one of our best British haiku writers, as well as one too often overlooked. Her work falls between experiential/autobiographical, comic (biographical/fictive) and experimental (see *Roadrunner* Scorpion Award, November 2009 IX:4 and *Roadrunner* X:3 October 2010 for instance).

Helen Buckingham herself says: "The reading and writing of Japanese style short-form poetry is my grounding mechanism, be that ground high or low, urban or rural, external or internal." (*Rattle* #47, Spring 2015 Tribute to Japanese Forms). Thankfully Red Moon Press have published her both in *A New Resonance 5: Emerging Voices in English-Language Haiku* (Red Moon Press, 2007), and the recently released *Sanguinella*.

Helen Buckingham says it herself in the book:

"Fifty-eight years since the seed was planted, *Sanguinella* provides a scrump back through the often bloody orchard that constitutes my life until now, from the rural pickings gathered over recent years in the bonsai city of Wells, to the tangled branches of a childhood spent battling various forms of blight in a mulberry-stained corner of South London."

In that haiku collection I have said that we will see the author measure up in her trials, tribulations, and also triumphs. Helen continues to triumph and mostly through the bloodiest of trials and battles with multiple operations and other invasive forays.

The opening line is a medical term, for which *Wikipedia* tells us the following: “Nothing by mouth” is a medical instruction meaning to withhold food and fluids. It is also known as *nil per os* (npo or NPO), a Latin phrase whose English translation is most literally, “nothing through the mouth.”

Variants include nil by mouth (NBM), *nihil/non/nulla per os*, or complete bowel rest. Purpose: The typical reason for NPO instructions is the prevention of aspiration pneumonia, e.g. in those who will undergo general anesthesia, or those with weak swallowing musculature, or in case of gastrointestinal bleeding, gastrointestinal blockage, or acute pancreatitis.

Hospital days are long days where even their food and sickly tea is often welcome. Of course we also have to have nothing to eat the day before we enter hospital for something. Food is both sustenance and comfort, and a sense of security. I’ve had to do an NPO at least once in my life, but also lacked additional money to buy food, or enough for two or three meals a day. Food helps to break up the day. At night many of us want to eat, perhaps a treat like a fish supper (fast-food fish, or chicken, with chips—aka fries) but this is denied to us. Even healthy food is off the table.

I both imagine a full moon being divided up for meals through the day, but the awful thought that other than water, maybe a drip, the patient is enduring an NPO for more than one night. I can also imagine the phases of the moon going by, and the only highly visible ‘white plate’ or ‘big white potato’ of a moon through a window that is both curse and visual treat.

I’ve found that verbs can distract, detract, diminish, or enhance a haiku, and this is a case where the middle line is paramount, denoting the extreme hunger pains, and wanton lust for food, not through gluttony but enforced denial by an authority, by an institution.

But going back to the haiku, it’s a chilling and long wait without food, to be cut open. Even a prisoner going to their execution is supposedly allowed a meal of their choice before death. Often it’s meat and potatoes, and there we have that big white potato of a moon again, both edible and inedible and unreachable.

I’d like to leave the last word to Jan ROUBÍČEK who wrote a thesis where Helen Buckingham appeared:

“[W]riters of the English-speaking world, like Helen Buckingham, Bruce Ross, Rose Hunter, Michael McClintock, etc., have each taken the classical haiku and adapted it not only to English prosody, but also to their personal needs and approaches (. . .) far from being only a haiku poet, she writes sonnets and free verse, humorous and darker.” (Jan Roubíček, 20th Century Haiku in English)

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

RE:VIRALS 131

plum blossoms
a specimen of my dream
sent to the lab

—Fay Aoyagi (*Beyond the Reach of My Chopsticks*, 2011)

This week's poet, Fay Aoyagi, gives us a couple of lines on the inspiration behind the poem:

The writing process of this haiku started with the word 'specimen' which I wanted to use after a visit to a doctor for a regular check-up. You'll never know where an idea for haiku would come from . . .

Norie Umeda has this to say:

The author's dream has extracted the essence from a specimen, and it will be reconstructed.
"plum blossoms" lying in the lab . . . as the vision of the East.

Edwin Lomere tumbles between hope and dread:

At first I'm struck by warm breezes. What else could waft the blossoms into light?
Then I think of plum preserves.
We use mason jars to collect this year's new life into preserves.
Maybe the color of her plums is spring twilight. Maybe her blossoms are like wraiths.
Maybe the dream aspect of L2 tumbles us back to reality. We gather in specimens of death. Death is ordained in spring. The cool microscopy of bee wings and cool glass labs could be hopeful or dreadful.
If the chemo goes well, we have a little plum wine.

Nicholas Klacsanzky meditates on the mystery:

This is an appropriate haiku for the season we are in now, as plum blossoms are a seasonal reference for early spring. The hope and magic of this time is apparent: snow is melting, unearthing what has been laying dormant; flower buds start to form, or begin opening; and people's moods begin to rise as the signs of winter's cruelty fade.

This feeling shows the connection between the two parts of this haiku. The plum blossoms, a beloved symbol of early spring, are juxtaposed with the author's dream (whether it is a dream related to sleep or a dream the author hopes to achieve, it is up to the reader). Plum blossoms are often attributed with having an ethereal quality, as they bloom when snow is still on the ground, making them even more outstanding to a viewer (they are often white with a red center). This ethereal quality is superbly matched with the imaginative last two lines. Through the power of the kigo and the associations we make with plum blossoms, the connection is clear.

In terms of sound, the letter "m" pops out the most. Besides the musicality, I think it gives the poem added dignity and seriousness. The haiku is laid out in a common short line/longer line/short line format, and needs no punctuation because of the clear separation between lines one and two. I find it interesting the author chose "a specimen" instead of making it more definite. I believe it adds to the mystery of the poem and gives it a more mystic atmosphere. Much of the art of haiku is knowing what to leave out, and this is a fine representation of this knowledge. Even though "the lab" has a definite article, it is still ambiguous. We do not know if it is the author's lab, an imaginary lab, or a lab in a hospital or institute. These elements make this haiku more awe-inspiring.

This haiku is an excellent example of how subtle and imaginative connections can be found and created within haiku.

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

RE:VIRALS 132

how many
become one
sound of rain

— Jacob Salzer (*Frogpond* 38:3)

Lynne Reese gets loopy:

I have a particular fondness for line-break—perhaps because I came to haiku from writing free-verse where line-break is the principal structuring tool. But it's still something that matters to me in constructing haiku, although I approach it with a lighter touch to avoid any overly dramatic effect that a longer poem might be able to carry and dilute.

And it was the idea of line-break that immediately hit me when I first read Salzer's haiku, on the page and out loud . . . the idea that the haiku would work as well without any:

how many become one sound of rain

The haiku's theme of oneness, alongside the option for the reader to pause in multiple places to play with the sense of what Salzer is saying, make it perfect for the monostich form. BUT . . . that's not what Salzer chose to do so instead of simply imposing myself on the poem I want to look deeper and appreciate the author's intention.

The line-breaks definitely slow the poem down: the slight breath pauses at the end of lines 1 and 2 followed by the white space on the page, before we read over to the next line. It creates a more contemplative mood than the words 'running' across the page on a single line.

Line 1 poses both a question and a statement: how many? or [this is] how many. It reminds me of the powerful opening to a koan.

Words placed at the beginning or ends of lines tend to carry more weight and line 2 ends on 'one' which reinforces the theme of unity

And the 3rd line isolates 'the sound of rain' adding more power or presence

to the image.

So yes, it works for me in three lines too. But in my head I can't help it taking on the form of single line that loops me back through itself, enjoyably, again and again.

Edwin Lomere shares the experience:

Jacob captures both the sight of rain gathering into a possible torrent, and the sound of it arriving; or simply the sound of the merging drops striking the back wall of our imaginations. I envision a tin roof, and then take it from there.

This is a brilliantly expressed moment that we all have experienced.

The fact that the poet painted it with so few words, attests to his skill.

Ajaya Mahala merges:

This is a magnificent haiku on the theme of coalescence. Rain begins with condensation, merger of particles with particles and then a whole sequence follows. Drops join drops, puddles merge with puddles and an undulated landscape becomes hidden under the water. There is no precise mathematical calculation for all these and there is no one to keep record of the changes. This is the 'aha' element in the haiku and a quick demonstration of the truth of Nature that it is capable of change. There may be a slow event spreading over a millennia and an event squeezed to minutes of a short drama can be there as well. With rain, there is a magical turn of events all of a sudden and it makes the mind of the observer a bit philosophical too.

In oriental literature, first rain has been considered to be a trigger for the feelings of love. The hearts of lovers run to their beloved ones and in the process many hearts join together. Rain takes us to the past, to the childhood or young days. Here times join with each other in this moment of celebration, sadness or nostalgia.

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

RE:VIRALS 133

spring rain
rereading my own book
I fall asleep

— William J. Higginson

Cezar Ciobika finds fall in the spring rainfall:

A wonderful ku that draws you through the subtle game of life and death. Spring means regeneration, revival, vitality, hope, while the falling into sleep can be understood as a corridor, a passage that delicately moves the reader to death. In addition, in English, fall can also mean autumn too, the season of harvest, but, in the same time, one of the end.

The rain symbolizes fertility, confidence in new crops, but if it's about ceaseless rainfall or flood generated by the snow melt, we can speculate that one can feel among lines the fear about the end and it can lead you to the biblical flood of Noah's time.

Very suggestive in this sense is the alliteration of "r" which, like a subliminal mantra, provides our minds with a monotone melody that simply hypnotizes everyone (narrator, author, reader) sending him/them, why not, to the realm of Morpheus.

"My own book" can be seen as the last reading of what he has created or maybe a review of what he has lived. Finally, the author, content of what he created and having a "valid passport", can leave (=pass away). He did not live in vain; he may leave something precious behind because he has seriously multiplied the talents left by God.

And how beautiful in the last verse the game that makes this time another liquid consonant,"l". This simply suggests the noiseless slipping into the world beyond. The WORK goes on.

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

REVIRALS 134

plum blossoms
I make plans
for my ashes

—Carolyn Hall (The 2006 Spiess Memorial Contest, First Prize)

Peter Newton finds equality:

Spring is a time of renewal. So it makes sense that one's thoughts might turn to planning for the future. But the hard truth in Hall's poem is a future in seeming contrast to the light-hearted theme set out in the first line. Sometimes, those of us who will be cremated speak of what will happen to our ashes. When I think of those conversations they are somewhat light-hearted. Carefree in a way. Some people want their ashes scattered in the sea, in a lake or over a meadow but usually the action is the same—that of scattering. Letting go. Surrender.

The plum blossoms in Hall's poem are also scattered it seems, though the action is implied. That's where the ashes come in. These short-lived plum blossoms are the poem's triggering image. There's a whimsical, familiar and fanciful tone to the usually somber act of planning for one's ashes. Perhaps this speaks to the specific character of a poet, or a haiku poet—one familiar with the characteristics of plum blossoms. Maybe the ashes will be scattered among them. Hall's poem is intensely personal and tender as if to say plum blossoms, people . . . we are all equal in the end. The reader can't help but pay respects for the living.

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

RE:VIRALS 135

rolling a cigarette
the canoe drifts
just where I want to go
—Michael Ketchek

Michael O'Brien relates:

c'est la vie

The first line of the poem is an experience smokers of rolling tobacco are quite familiar with, or ex-smokers in my case. I smoked rolling tobacco for many years and the quick effortless and calming practice of rolling the cigarette, that comes with years of experience, would be somewhat lost on a non smoker. That being said the last two lines generously make up for this as everyone is welcomed into the poem.

The visual scene, if one takes the poem literally, is quite generous. I can feel the sun coming through my shirt onto my shoulders. The current moves me away from the tall grass on the bank. I lick the gum on the rolling paper and close the deal. I feel for a lighter in my jean pocket only to remember I put it my breast pocket. The flame kisses the tip and I inhale. The water's current sets me on course and I feel good as I exhale into a rich July sky.

This poem can also easily be read metaphorically – letting things go, or what will be will be, floats on the surface, in the small first line only to be ripped open in the second – that jab hook combo found in many good haiku. The general public are presumably not privy to the intricacies of canoes and water vehicles but we are all aware of currents and the rivers innate want to roll. It's poetic in itself to the point of cliché so it's worth noting how Ketchek not only avoids the word river but all direct reference to water is completely avoided. There are many ways to skin a cat as there are as many ways to avoid a babbling brook under a cooled jeweled moon for the skilled poet. It is somewhat obvious to say then it's not a poem about smoking or even riding a canoe – it seems to be a narrative of somewhat affectionate or passive nihilism – a secular God's will. Maybe the author might even refer to

this as c'est la vie – we've all got a term unique to our local and culture. An interesting side note is the somewhat visual similarity between the canoe and a hand-rolled cigarette. The poet could have easily picked boat over canoe – rowing boat would even have added some alliteration to the r in rolling and cigarette.

Personally I do enjoy the poem as it reminds me of wasted summers smoking and riding canoes on the canals where I worked and lived in North Holland. A hard week spent grafting and just lolling the weekend away – because, why not? We'll all end up where we want to eventually.

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

RE:VIRALS 130

'will this be one of the days i remember?' and grass
— Chris Gordon (*A New Resonance: Emerging Voices in
English-Language Haiku*, 1999)

Nancy Rapp looks forward:

I hope you know how much I look forward to learning from the comments in re:Virals and being introduced to many haiku I'm not familiar with. That said, this one seems as stripped down and basic as a haiku can get. Haiku leads me to be mindful of the simple, ordinary beauty in every moment. Then crafting haiku from the experience creates many connections for remembering and enjoying the moment again and again. All I need is the grass and seeing it again for the first time.

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

RE:VIRALS 137

dusk
the girl we didn't like
with fireflies in her hair

— Harriot West (*Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*)

Ana López Navajas contemplates:

“The girl that did not like us” has qualities beyond her mere appearance. It is only necessary to be attentive and contemplate these fireflies in order to make our transformation possible, and allow union with the world—with the help of nature (fireflies) as an instrument.

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

RE:VIRALS 138

Final de agosto.
A un tiempo: sol de ocaso y
naciente luna llena.

The end of august.
At the same time: sunset sun
and rising full moon.

— Ana López Navajas (Moon in the River: International
haiku contest of the University of Law of Albacete, Dec. 2016)

Alan Summers sums up summers:

Is this all about the end of an actual summer, or a little of both literal and symbolic? Of course early in our youth we might be, as I was, stunned that the sun and moon can appear in the sky at the same time. But in life many things can occur at the same time, such as love and hate, life and death, peace and war, and relationships that end physically but not emotionally. The end of august might be the end of a summer romance or adventure, and the next month is back to business as a supposedly normal and sensible, and responsible, person. Bring back august!

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

RE:VIRALS 130

early dark
the cathedral visible
only as windows

— Karen Hoy (*Another Country: Haiku Poetry from Wales*,
Gomer Press, 2011)

Mary Hanrahan goes back in time:

This beautiful haiku immediately takes me back to being in church as a small child. We often attended a cathedral in my hometown near my grandmother's house. I can still picture it in my mind. I can hear the echoes of the heavy, wooden kneelers hitting the tiled floor. Instead of listening to the sermon I would get lost in the play of light happening along the arched ceiling from the dazzling kaleidoscope of colors seeping through the towering stained glass windows. This is what I remember from all those years sitting in mass, often wishing I could escape the monotony of having to sit still and the litany of words. We see so much of the world through windows on both sides of the glass. Whether you are standing inside a cathedral or down the road, windows open up a contemplative space, a space of reflection. A window provides insight into the physical and spiritual nature of the world that surrounds us, and which often allows us a deeper connection to others and ourselves.

There are so many facets to this haiku that lead down a variety of paths for interpretation but I am always brought back to the cathedral windows. My view is from the inside of the cathedral looking out. The early dusk perhaps hinting at life being cut too short, far too soon. Just enough light is seeping through the cathedral window to soothe. Perhaps it is a divine moment of contemplation at the end of life. The reflective power packed inside this haiku is quite dazzling—much like a stained glass window.

Hansha Teki gets crepuscular:

Dusk is the time in which the light of day enters its process of annihilation—seemingly solid shapes and structures lose definition—darkness comes home to roost on the familiar, just as a crow on a bare tree at autumn dusk. Cathedrals speak of a permanency and transcendence in contrast to the relative transience and mundane utility of other structures. In the dimming light of day the cathedral's rock solid existence may be inferred only by the apparition of the windows—(a synecdoche?). Cathedrals can also be a place of sanctuary from a world that can appear cruel and bereft of meaning. Are the windows visible from light within or from light without? Does the poet-persona experience an invitation to a deeper relationship with a God who is or has become a stranger or does the scene evoke the poet-persona's detachment and separation from all that cathedral may represent to her? So much meaning hangs on the word “only”.

Marietta McGregor is humbled:

This haiku is an intensely visual poem, while retaining a subtle spirituality in its theme and imagery. We can imagine it is nightfall in winter at a high northern latitude, or perhaps even very far south, somewhere like Tasmania. The golden hour and the blue hour have passed. The outline of this imposing structure has gradually faded to black against a black sky. Were it not for the illumination, ‘the light in the window,’ the great cathedral would be unseen. But it is the time for evening worship, and we DO see light, perhaps shining through medieval stained glass, or a rose window, the colours standing out vividly against the darkness. Whether one believes in one or more deities or does not, in a way I think the poem is a gentle metaphor for hope. The light shining from a window, whether it is a farmhouse in the dark countryside or a front parlour window of a cottage in a town or this imposing church, is above all comforting. It says there is someone here, there is a sense of welcome. The poem also whisked me right back to my Sunday school days, when we used to sing ‘Jesus bids me shine . . . like a little candle . . . in this world of darkness.’ Of course, the poem is also humbling. It says that however imposing our human creation may seem, in the end there may be only a faint glow left behind where once it stood. The poem changes focus from

the soaring grandeur of the church, down to the glimmers of its windows, a very interesting and clever use of ‘reverse telescoping’ (which may not be the proper term, but describes the effect). I think the poem is both effective and memorable.

Kathe Palka gets biblical:

At first glance Karen Hoy’s fine haiku “early dark” sets a beautiful and somewhat haunting winter evening scene, “early dark” indicating a night near the winter solstice. A darkness so complete on this evening that even the large structure of a cathedral can only be discerned by the light emanating from its windows. I imagine it might also be the night of a new moon or of thick cloud cover deepening the dark. It can be seen as a depiction of the limited power of mankind, even in our grandest creations, in this case a cathedral, in contrast to that of the natural world. But from this earthly image my mind then jumps to a common Christian metaphor: the church as a light for good, in the darkness of a troubled world. I imagine this as an evening near Christmas when the activity in the cathedral would be heightened with the preparations for the season’s celebrations. And so the scene set on this night recalls for me the biblical verse from the Book of John, 1:5: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Edwin Lomere finds *ma*:

This haiku has a lightness to it, even though it speaks of the impression of a cathedral.

In L3, the poet uses the words “only,” and “as windows,” making me conjure what might have taken place over the centuries in such an ancient world.

Like other great haiku, we are left with all this unknown, and yet known, space to explore!

It is a chill on the skin impact.

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

RE3VIRALS 140

cloudless sky
a pelican's pouch
full of light

— Debbie Strange

Marion Clarke left us this comment:

What an uplifting image. From a vast, clear sky to the detail of a pelican's pouch as it flies overhead, as if it is carrying the sun. A perfect day completed by a natural observation. Simply delightful.

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

REVIRALS 141

rumble of thunder . . .
his question falls
into my silence

— Rebecca Drouilhet (*Butterfly Dream*, July 23, 2015)

Lynne Rees puts on her critical hat:

I'm unsure if this haiku edges too close to cliché, in the way the rumble of thunder acts as a premonition of the suggested rumblings of disagreement between the two people, and the possible arrival of a metaphorical storm. But I do like 'his question falls/ into my silence,' and the idea of something dropping, something not caught but left to fall, illustrates the emotional distance very effectively. As does 'his' and 'my' which indicate two separate areas of ownership. And the ellipsis at the end of the fragment in line 1 cleverly mirrors what remains unsaid in the following phrase.

Am I being too picky over the pathetic fallacy? Probably. Perhaps I've read too many haiku that use thunder to mirror actual or potential arguments. And, as I say above, there is enough here for me to enjoy in Drouilhet's haiku once I take off my critical hat.

Nicholas Klacsanzky gets connected:

Questions can sometimes be scary, but just like the rumble of thunder, they too pass away. I feel this haiku could be about a romantic relationship, where the boyfriend or husband asks a difficult question, and the poet decides not to answer out of either shame or disgust at the question. Making the comparison between this event and thunder gives the relationship an epic feel, as often relationships feel like.

The ellipsis shows the time it takes for the thunder to simmer down, and also for the question to pass away from their attention. The "r" sounds in the first line aptly show the "rumble," and the "s" sounds in the last two lines could be portraying the hissing sound after a lightning strike or the sound of the

wind in a thunder storm. The pacing of lines, with suspense created in the second line, works well to astonish the reader, like a small bit of lightning. A haiku that connects nature with human relationships in a seamless manner.

Alan Summers questions the silence:

I like the musicality of the opening line, giving us the heavy silence before and after the thunder. Often people are unnerved by what they deem as silence, and have a need to break it, even if it interrupts a wonderful silence and noise dynamic of thunder.

The opening line avoids a direct verb, leaving us with a single and strong verb in the second line. At times of heightened silence some of us may want to use that for our thoughts, while others use it as a catalyst to ask a question, possibly even totally unrelated to the phenomena unfolding before us. Do we stay humbled or break up the experience, with our own dramatic utterance? Silence, although I don't consider it as an absence of noise and action, can be the trigger for all kinds of things. Here it's a question that falls into someone's quietness, and we might wonder if it's ever answered in words.

Some very strong key words from "rumble" to "question" to "silence," and either an unanswered response by the spectator, or one thankfully interrupted by either lightning or another drum roll of thunder.

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

REVIRALS 142

overnight train
a handprint smears
the moon

—Paul Chambers (*This Single Thread*, Alba Publishing, 2015)

Alan Summers lets his imagination soar:

There is something romantic about an overnight train. I immediately think of Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like it Hot* (directed by Billy Wilder, 1959).

Although both overnight (sleeper) trains I have been on were far from romantic, I'm glad I've done them; one across Europe, and one from the South of England to Glasgow. Setting that aside, it's a great context setting for whatever comes next; and an opening line can certainly raise our expectations, and will us to read further.

Taking the middle line alone, before including the third & last line, it certainly intrigues this particular reader. It's not 'handprint smears' but a single handprint smear. Is it mine, if I place myself into the poem with my own experiences? Is it a smear that was missed by the cleaners, or a clue? Again, I can think of another iconic train film, that of *The Lady Vanishes* (a 1938 British mystery thriller film directed by Alfred Hitchcock).

Haiku, being short, can struggle to excite, and should it be necessary to do so anyway? Of course not, and I appreciate the quietness of haiku as much as the dramatic treatments we sometimes give them. So, onto the third line, which is often the denouement in a Western-style haiku; and we have an iconic haikai theme, which feels quiet, with just 'the moon.'

In fact, just this alone would work for me, and my imagination:

overnight train
the moon

I think the power of this haiku is both the dynamic of the opening and last line working so well with both sense of movements. It is developed further

by the wonder of 'a handprint smears,' where of course we have a verb. Now verbs can detract from or enhance a haiku, but here, even though it's highly noticeable, it takes the poem up a notch again. It's an action that works in parallel with the movement of the train, and the moon.

Is the narrator's hand smear, or that of the previous occupant, or even that of the cleaner who leaned against it and created the 'smeared moon,' now experienced by the current passenger?

The verb choice of 'smears' instead of 'smear' suggests the action is that of the narrator as occupant. Is this because they were reaching over, across, or down from their bunk, sober or otherwise? Did attempt to make the window clearer to see the moon, and failed? Are they wishing to smear, or put a smear on the moon? Is it their equivalent of putting/setting a footprint onto the moon just as Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin did, or recalling that Michael Collins could have chosen to be the last person to walk on the moon (1969) although a few followed many years later? Is it that their imagination made the long haul train into a spaceship, a space train, but realising it wasn't, and added their own, though fleeting, signature on the moon's surface? Is it a wish fulfillment to walk on the moon, or simply to recognize its presence? Perhaps all of the above or none of the above.

As a reader I do like my imagination to soar, and the haiku succeeds in allowing me to do this.

The poet of this week's poem, Paul Chamber's, adds a few words:

I have often found travelling by night invokes a different pitch of perception than travelling by day. The motion of movement closer to a lull than to sleep, the processing of sensory data slower, the drifting into and out of dreams more abstracted. In this sedated state, the image of the moon smeared by a child's handprint, impressed itself. The quietness of the image, the abstraction of it, against the slow, steady dark of the journey – these are the elements and contrasts I have attempted to capture in this haiku.

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

REVIRALS 143

unspooling
a fishing fly loosed
at riverine shadows

— David Briggs (“Haiku: The Keyhole of its Details”, *Blithe Spirit* 25:3, 2015)

Alan Summers offers us a fragment from an interview, with David Briggs, in which this week’s poem appeared (albeit in a variant version):

We often leave out words and phrases that another kind of poet would and should keep, and why not? I feel, on a personal level, that haiku works to enable readers differently. Haiku, to me, revolve around something like a wheel with its spaces between its spokes, and it’s those gaps that add to the particular counter-intuitive poem, to some, as its design (form).

For example:

unspooling whisk and tick
of a fishing fly loosed
at riverine shadows –
thought swims off downstream

“Riverine shadows,” a wonderful phrase adding to a hauntingness that haiku can be so good at as well.

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

REVIRALS 144

finding a home
on her naked skin —
the kingfisher

— Eva Limbach, *failed haiku* 2.20

Garry Eaton imagines:

As with any good haiku, this one requires an act of imagination to make it complete. The wording suggests the impossible, that a kingfisher flies in and transforms itself into a tattoo on a woman's naked skin. We know it's impossible in reality, but there is something satisfying in imagining it happen anyway, in seeing life imitate art and transcend, to some degree, its usual limitations.

Willie Bongcaron steps out of his comfort zone:

“Everyone has his/her own comfort zone...” is what comes to mind in this ku. Even a kingfisher, which is ever alert perched on a branch, does have its own comfort zone. The kingfisher though could also be construed as “the threat” vis-a-vis our comfort zone. Thus, picture an alert kingfisher on a branch with threatening attitude. This ku is deep and with a story to tell that definitely applies to everyone.

Jacob Salzer thinks critically:

When looking up “kingfisher” on Google, we find: “any of numerous fish or insect-eating birds of the family Alcedinidae that have a large head and a long, stout bill and are usually crested and brilliantly colored.”

I see the image of a kingfisher as a tattoo on a woman. I also see the kingfisher as a symbol of freedom in terms of flight, and enjoy the paradox of a seemingly permanent image of our human impermanence. Also, the

emphasis on “naked” emphasizes a stark contrast. It brings a feeling of an empty drawing board, innocence, and vulnerability, where bold mental impressions (in Sanskrit, these are called samskaras) seem to appear. Also, this haiku brings a feeling of unity with something not human, in this case, a bird. In the digital age, I think it’s critical for more humans to develop a real sense of connection with our natural environment.

Marilyn Ward keeps it brief:

This Haiku made me think of a young woman flashing her new tattoo.

Clayton Beach goes down to the river:

There’s a delicate sensuality to this ku, with my first reading delivering the image of a kingfisher, tattooed perhaps, on a woman’s skin. Her nudity and the bird suggest a riverside scene, a young lovely basking unabashed in the peaceful tranquility of the halcyon days, with an underlayer of eternal glory suggested through spiritual symbolism. The kingfisher is a bird that is rich in associations in western poetry, thus it taps into the vertical axis in a way many shasei inspired English-language haiku fail to do.

If we take a step back, and split the poem at the cut, the base section can be read to contain a sense of self-discovery, “finding a home” and then, with a slight change, “[in] her naked skin,” this section openly serves to place the image on the woman’s body, but an undercurrent also suggests a level of self-acceptance, of reveling in one’s own body and an open sensuality reminiscent of haiku by poets like Enomoto Seifu,

umi ni sumu / like a fish
uo no goto mi wo / in the sea, this body of mine
tsuki suzushi / cool in the moonlight
— trans. Ueda (*Far Beyond the Field*)

In the superposed section, the simple image of the kingfisher comes to

mind, in its natural setting—brilliant oriental blue and cutting into the water without a splash, it has the power of raw nature, and if contrasted to the feminine sensuality of the previous section, also contains a masculine energy in the bird as it swiftly enters the water.

This short poem is at once sensual, ecstatic and serene, with several layers of meaning and image to explore, a well-crafted and traditional poem that feels perfectly natural and appropriate to our contemporary world. Oddly enough it was published as senryu in “Failed Haiku,” but this only serves to show that our finest English-language “senryu” read very much like modern, humanistic haiku, and are certainly the furthest thing from failure.

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

REVIRALS 145

crow's inner circle
the dark part of my eye
— Stephen Toft, *Is/let*

Hansha Teki cites Hughes' mythic trickster:

Stephen Toft's ku hit me as if it were a newly discovered annotation in my copy of Ted Hughes' 1970 book, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (Faber & Faber).

Anyone familiar with Hughes' *Crow* will know well Crow's elemental manifestation of all that is blackest in ourselves and the world we have fashioned for ourselves sealing our membership of Crow's inner circle.

Toft succinctly brings "Crow blacker than ever" and our shadow selves eye to eye.

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

REVIRALS 146

dark sea
surging to the brink
of words

— Eve Luckring, *The Tender Between* Ornithopter Press (2018)

Alan Summer's gets Homeric:

The opening line has me thinking about our epic journeys, and of Homer, where the wine-dark sea is a common interpretation of “oinops pontos.” Both the sea and wine have both acted dually as muses and both as our last stand, and sadly, sometimes, our demise.

“Even so I yearn day after day, longing to reach home, and see the hour of my return. And if some god should strike me, out on the wine-dark sea, I will endure it, owning a heart within inured to suffering. For I have suffered much, and laboured much, in war and on the seas: add this then to the sum.”

“Homer: The Odyssey Book V“. (Trans. A.S. Kline)

The opening line of dark sea moves into its companion line that suggests the surge of tides, but also being carried to the brink, but of what, our sanity, hope, fears? The last line is of words, quite literally our main means of communication with ourselves, and to others. This poem can feel foreboding, but it could also be about the conundrum of being a communicator using the medium of poetry.

Is the poem about being a writer, and physically close to the sea, where the surge of its breakers and power is creating a rhythm in the poet to write? Is it the surge and push to make ourselves heard against the multi-billion voices of people, electronics, and white noise from other quarters?

We all have our journeys, those epic external or internal ones: We need not

always travel as far as Homer, or come to a beachfront, on a war footing, it could just be a decision to sink or swim within our words, rather than without them.

Nathan Sidney speaks of the unspeakable:

This dark sea could be literal or metaphorical, as in the Buddhist expression, “the mind is an ocean”. In this latter interpretation we experience a surge of emotion, some powerful feeling such as grief or anger, surging forth but not finding an expression in words. Perhaps the author holds back for fear of upsetting someone or perhaps the feeling is ineffable/unspeakable. It could be a comment on the act of writing a haiku, the possibilities of a poem dissolved together in the unconscious surging towards the tip of the tongue but not quite spilling over. This reading is also supported if we understand the dark sea to be a literal one. The author confronting this powerful oceanic presence and struggling to turn the world into breath/poetry, again we encounter the ineffable, where the experience of the ocean is ultimately indescribable but the poets confrontation with the ocean is ocean itself, surging, vast, mysterious, hidden. The line between mind and world disappears, like the line between sea and land, no hard border but rather a liminal zone of exchange, one becoming the other, back and forth, mind is ocean is ocean is mind . . .

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

REsVIRALS 147

where the wild things
might have been...
the autumn sky

— Angela Terry, *The Heron's Nest XVIII:1* (2016)

Jacob Salzer goes global:

This is a powerful haiku. It immediately brings to mind the extinction of several species on Earth due to destructive human activities. The autumn sky brings a feeling of emptiness, but not a joyful one, as it is now devoid of certain forms of life. I see this haiku as a warning and also as an opportunity to reevaluate how we live. How can we lower our carbon footprint? How can we lower our dependence on coal power plants? I prefer a simple life, but, on a mass scale, our dependence on technology and the damage that has been done (and continues to be done) to the Earth has deep, long-term consequences. Some species are already gone due to destructive human behavior. Apparently, some humans don't realize the importance of various species within a complex eco-system that we depend on. Also, the colors of the autumn sky brought to mind an explosion, as if the sky was on fire in its emptiness and this seems to reinforce the dangers of several human activities. But, at the end of the day, we have within our power a choice: and that is to make small decisions that make a difference. Even one person may inspire several people to act more responsibly with intelligence and kindness. "Act local, think global." There is always a choice.

Nicholas Klacsanzky saw the best wolves of his generation destroyed by silence:

This brings a sense of sadness, and points to the global crisis of deforestation. It reminds us of the desolation that is to come to most of the world in the coming future if we continue on our present course. In my hometown of Woodway, which used to be an almost pristine wilderness with a few houses here and there, more and more forest is being cut down to meet the demands

of the population growth in Seattle. The coyotes had stopped from howling for more than decade, until they miraculously began again just last year. Angela lives close to my hometown, and I'm sure she feels the effects of Seattle's growth as well.

The barrenness of autumn and the ellipsis create a strong mood of desolation. The "w" sounds in the first line also produce a sense of something frail, which add to the atmosphere of the haiku. I think this poem effectively makes the reader feel the devastation that will come in our era of climate change, and perhaps prompts us to do something about it.

Dana Grover tames the beasts:

The first thing that comes to mind is the classic book for children by Maurice Sendak, "Where the Wild Things Are." In it, a young boy, Max, who has been naughty is sent off to his room without supper as punishment. The room mysteriously transforms to a jungle where Max encounters fantastical wild beasts, tames them, and is named "King of the Wild Beasts," and a "wild rumpus" takes place. Max gets homesick, though, and returns to his room where a hot supper is waiting for him. I have read that story many times to my children and now to my grandchildren.

The above haiku, like many, can speak in different ways to different people, each reader bringing his own thoughts and experiences to the image presented. In this case it could be that a "Max," now in the autumn of his years, no longer capable of a fantastical escape from a punishing situation, has to deal with what is rather than what could be.

Fred Krink wonders what might have been:

The first line has me thinking about the children's author Maurice Sendak, and his both infamous and famous book "Where the Wild Things Are" (1963). The story has only 338 words and is about a boy sent to bed without supper (I think that happened at least once to me too). My own bedroom

had a scary universe underneath it, which I was forced to check out before I tried to get a night's sleep.

Instead of a *Time Bandits* scenario (*Time Bandits* is a 1981 British fantasy film co-written, produced, and directed by Terry Gilliam), the bedroom becomes transformed into a liberating experience, a forest of experience, which starts as frightening and ends happily in both worlds.

The second line of 'might have been' could mean all our 'might have been's' if we hadn't made a brave leap of faith, or just allowing our imagination to roam, under that autumn sky.

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

REVIRALS 148

funeral wind
I wonder how heavy
the trees are

— Lori A Minor, *Frameless Sky* 7 (2017)

Lucy Whitehead reads the grief:

I think this haiku captures very well several aspects of grief. The first thing that struck me was the sense that when you are grieving or experiencing depression, the whole world feels heavy. Anyone who has experienced grief knows the physical weight of it—so this haiku has a visceral quality for me. But also it captures the strange and often disconnected thoughts we have around loss and grief. Sometimes the experience throws up surreal trains of thought such as how heavy trees are. Especially at a funeral there can be a type of temporary dissociation, where the experience is so intense that we cut off a little to get through the day. It is part of shock and the grieving process itself. It strikes me as a rather beautiful and authentic description of being at the funeral of a loved one.

Sheila Sondik senses shivers:

A pallbearer feels the weight of the deceased in his/her coffin. The wind in the trees connects the living plants to the wooden coffin. What if he could feel the full weight of a tree, as he does of the deceased?

A mourner at the funeral shivers as she feels the wind buffet her body, as she hears the shivering of the leaves. She feels the weight of the trees, as she feels the loss of the deceased.

The trees are heavy, the occasion is heavy, the funeral wind in the leaves is light, but connects the human actors with nature, the living and the dead.

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

REVIRALS 140

deep snow
in a dream, I find
her password in

— Mark Harris, *Haiku in English* (Ed. Jim Kacian et al)

Alan Summers tries to unlock the password:

The three-line haiku has the last two lines equally indented, with the first letter of each line nearly falling directly underneath the 'o' in snow. Is it a concrete haiku, a visual poem at first glance Perhaps, as the last two lines (dis)appear as if underneath the deep snow literally as well as if in a dream.

There is a use of alliteration, and of assonance, with deep and dream, and not just the two instances of 'in' but a hidden third 'in' within f(in)d. The use of a comma, unusual in contemporary haiku, is highly effective alongside the dreamlike rhyme of the double 'in' spanning those last two lines.

Is it all about finding the key to unlock the coding of a dream, and in fact someone else's dream? Dreams can be circular, perhaps imitating our circular lives as well, until we finish something in our waking version of life, whether one we were looking for, or one that is unexpected.

The circular-ness of 'in a dream, I find her password in a dream, in a dream, I find her password in in' and with those doubled up 'in's, do we find the final "in" that we are chasing after? And what is her password in deep snow, is it the white noise of life in general, or is it finding actual love in a world that seems to frown upon it as merely sentiment? In dreams we can often have the answer to almost everything until the rising up through the various layers of sleep into full wakefulness, when often we lose our all important "open-all-within" password.

Is the answer just that one and unfinished word 'in'? What can that mean?

I love snow, and there are more than fifty words, especially in the Scottish language (where it's over four hundred), but can we dream, can we, is it still legal even?

This is a very beautiful poem, mysterious, unanswered, password protected, but it resonates powerfully for me, and I am okay about being unable to unlock it, just to be touched by its deep snow is fine for me.

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

RE=VIRALS 150

river mouth
the kingfisher opens
its own

— Lovette Carter, *Yanty's Butterfly: A Haiku Nook Anthology* (2016)

Mark Gilbert empathises:

Like last week's haiku, I read this as being elliptical in the sense that the end of line 3 can run on and continue with the beginning of line 1, making the poem never-ending and timeless. It suggests that the image occurs frequently across the world but is rarely captured by humans.

Also, I felt it resonated beyond the scene of a bird skimming its beak across water by implying that the writer was herself open-mouthed at observing this scene. Paradoxically, the minimal description—and lack of adjectives—allows us to empathise with her feelings as the observer.

My experience of visiting the Norfolk Broads is that you never know when a kingfisher is going to flash across your vision—and usually it is gone before you even start to think “what was that?” This haiku captures that sense of surprise and awe.

Nicholas Klacsanzky takes in the grandeur:

I think this is a fine example of the aesthetic blurring of two things. Though the river is large and the kingfisher is small, the kingfisher takes on epic imagery. Through the association with the river, we might believe that the kingfisher is a river in itself.

The many “o” sounds in the haiku lend to the idea and image of an open mouth. In addition, I like the indentation of the last two lines to show the separate, yet grand nature of the kingfisher. A striking haiku with direct depth.

Lucy Whitehead finds multiplicity:

This haiku on first reading seemed to be quite simple, but as I reread it several layers emerged. First of all, there is the obvious connection that is being made between the mouth of the river and the kingfisher's mouth, evoking a deep interconnectedness between different aspects of nature, one alive and one not, and implying the inseparability of life from its environment. But then whilst looking up "kingfisher song" on YouTube I noticed, behind the exquisite voice of the kingfisher, the noise of a river. So for me the river's mouth suggests two different readings—both the mouth of the river where the kingfisher is located in the haiku and the voice of the river itself. The haiku thus forces us to compare the kingfisher opening its mouth with the river's mouth in two ways: the song flows from the kingfisher's mouth as the water of the river flows into the ocean; but also the river opens its 'mouth' in song as well.

Of course, the kingfisher could also be fishing. If the kingfisher is fishing, then the river too takes on a predatory quality. Alternatively, it could be read as highlighting a contrast between the kingfisher taking in fish and the river spewing out water into the sea. There is a lot of tension in this ambiguity as well as in the ambiguity of what the kingfisher is actually about to do with its mouth.

Another reading that occurred to me was what if the kingfisher was silent: what would that mean? Is the river mouth polluted? It calls to mind the 'voice of nature,' the fact that the kingfisher can't tell us how it feels about the growing pollution of our rivers and oceans. It can open its mouth but it has no voice in that regard. The 'mouth' of the river itself has no voice either.

The haiku is poised both at the place where the river flows into the sea and at the moment before the kingfisher sings or catches its prey: both liminal states. There is tremendous energy and potential in that liminal place, both in space and time, adding to the tension in the haiku.

I love the simplicity and economy of the language. The assonance of the 'i' sounds makes this haiku rather lyrical and songlike, potentially reflecting its subject matter (although a song is only ever implied), especially as they are beautifully balanced with one at the start of the first line, two in the middle of the second, and one at the start of the third. The alliteration of the 'o' sounds also adds to this, with one in the second line and one in the third line; the 'ou' in the first line is close enough to partially echo it. The v-shape of the 'i' sound pattern is echoed by the v-shape of the 'o' sounds. The symmetry of the vowel sounds both vertically within themselves and horizontally with each other makes this a very balanced poem. The repetition of 'er' sounds contributes to the lyrical quality and also heightens the comparison between the kingfisher and the river. There's also a repetition of 'th' sounds and 'n' sounds. There are many sounds that echo each other as the kingfisher echoes the river.

It seems a deceptively simple but finely crafted and very tight haiku with great depth and expressiveness. It has a beautiful and evocative interplay of meanings. However we read one part affects the way we read the other—the parts are interrelated. It can be read in many ways and it seems to elicit this multiplicity of readings almost effortlessly.

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

RE:VIRALS 151

incision
clear
water
flailing open

— Eve Luckring, *Roadrunner* 11:3

Sadly we got no comments in for this week's *re:Virals*, so I will choose next week's poem.

REVIRALS 152

ラジオ鳴って留守か留守居か花マンガ

Radio blaring.

Is he out, or just pretending to be out?

Mango flowers . . .

— Taki Katsuya (勝谷多喜), Translated by Danny Blackwell.
Original Japanese sourced from The National Diet Library, Japan.

Alan Summers speculates:

Back in the early 20th century, up to the 1930s, a number of Japanese people moved to Brazil and often started writing haiku under intense ill-health due to weather, endemic diseases, and work conditions.

The key word is mango, and the haiku was composed at the time when mangos were truly exotic to anyone outside of Brazil, and not the common fruit they are today. I don't think this is any mere *kigo* thrown in to suggest a season. Mangos are tricky to grow, maintain, protect, and cultivate, and every aspect of weather, second by second, effects its outcome.

If you've never truly tasted ripe mango picked just minutes or hours previously you might not get the extra dimension that cannot be caught in commercial mango juice drinks, it's just not there. It's a parallel aftertaste, a contradiction in terms to be sure.

In the collection of *kigo*/seasonal words and phrases for Brazil called "*Burajiru Kiyose*," Summer is defined as November to January. Brazil has a tropical and subtropical climate, and new *kigo* were required. I can guess that the author was either involved in the fruit farm business, or was visiting, not realising how farm work is entirely weather based, and not a 9-5 affair, and thus either a pre-arranged or off the cuff get together is meaningless for

someone who works on a farm.

Perhaps the author of the haiku finally guessed, had “the penny dropped,” when he noticed mango flowers, and that their friend would have had to rush off at less than a second’s notice.

“. . . the most important aspect of the fruit business is the least certain: weather. It influences everything from growing and distribution to sales. Temperature makes the fruit ripen more quickly or slowly. Tropical rain can wash out the dirt-track access to a farm. As regards sales in Britain, sunshine is as important as temperature: a bright weekend can boost sales by 30 per cent and the supply chain must rev up quickly to meet demand. . . workers may go six times or more to each tree to pick the fruit at its peak, when it is sweetest (. . .) Next to the ripening fruit are other trees covered in cascades of flowers awaiting pollination by ants and bees. Though only a few flowers on each stem become fruit, there will be up to 120 mangoes on each of these trees.”

Hattie Ellis (Oct 2013) *The Telegraph* newspaper. (“With love from Brazil: the mango’s journey to Britain.”)

The radio still playing is no Marie Celeste moment, it takes vital seconds to even rush over to the device and fumble the switch off. Those seconds are best preserved getting footwear on, gloves, and any other equipment, including a bottle of water. This is Summer, and there’s going to be intense and highly demanding work, best not to forget anything for the day. The radio can wait until the evening after all.

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

RE:VIRALS 153

just-fledged light
chips of wren song
from the log pile

— Claire Everett, *Presence* 45 (2001)

Marion Clarke finds humour:

This is a breathtakingly beautiful haiku from Claire Everett showing a keen observation of nature and a hint of humour in the final line.

The description of light as having been ‘just-fledged’ delicately depicts the moment when the growing dawn becomes full daylight, and the use of ‘chips of wren song’ is an inspired choice, as this particular bird’s song is a series of short, clipped sounds. I also found light humour in the last line as there is the suggestion that the wren’s unseen notes fly (at up to 700 per minute) like woodchips from a log pile!

Greetings from Radhamani Sarma:

Greetings! Despite my limited perspective of haiku knowledge, as writing haiku is somewhat new to me, I humbly take up this venture of commenting upon this haiku. Claire Everett has woven a beautiful haiku about the chirping of this small, beautiful bird. Like a three dimensional spectrum, the three lines consecutively show the images or different concepts—all related to the wren and its environment.

The wren raises the newborn chick and the song cautions other birds not to enter its roost while nesting. As regards the line “just-fledged light,” the poet has meticulously coined the term; the new born chick with still tender wings with which to fly, while the mother wren takes care of feeding the fledgling. In the second line, the concentration is on the wren song: “chips” could also possibly mean echoes, repeated calls of birds resembling whistling.

The third line (“log pile”) shows us the wood, or forest atmosphere; blocks of wood, dead wood, or timber, where the bird picks up pieces of wood to build nests, to raise chicks.

The bird’s uncontrollable merry singing and jubilation starts from the logs as the bird carries pieces of wood to construct a nest. This poem is so dexterously, beautifully drawn, and is itself a wren song by Claire Everett.

Mark Gilbert interprets the fragments:

Line 1 is a delicious way to describe daybreak and it chimes with L2/3 which is another unexpected yet welcome emergence. Note that the wren itself is not ‘just-fledged’ or he would not be singing: I think ‘fledged’ refers to the song, not the bird. At first ‘chips’ seems out of place in this poem, and I’m still not sure it is wholly successful. Yes, wood turns into chips when it is shredded, and ‘chips’ hints at both the ‘chirps’ and ‘cheeps’ of the wren’s song. But also ‘chips’ emphasises the fragmentary and chaotic output of the male wren, stopping and starting, improvising yet apparently effortlessly repeating. To me the synesthesia of this poem compares the sound of the wren with mottled speckles of sunlight emerging through gaps in the woodpile and illuminating its shadow. The whole poem evokes the arrival of Spring in the sudden flowering of a lifeless woodpile one morning.

Scott Mason chips in:

Claire Everett’s poem shares not just a lovely moment but the dynamic sensory processing of that moment through some stunning sleights of pen.

Just how can one convey the impression of simultaneous sensory stimuli with sequential (if brief) lines? Here the poet pulls it off through conflation and foreshadowing. Eschewing the usual formulation of “first light” in L1, she gives us the wondrous “just-fledged light” instead, borrowing a modifier from the avian world. When an actual bird appears in L2, its staccato tune issues forth not in notes or even chirps but in “chips.” Those chips anticipate

(and confirm) the setting of this event: the log pile of L3.

We witness and partake in both the visible birth and audible celebration of a new day.

Through Everett's perceptiveness and craft we're privileged to experience not so much a quaint nature vignette as a moment of near-mystical union.

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

RE:VIRALS 154

clover in flower
the Holsteins come
with four stomachs

— Dan Schwerin, *Modern Haiku* 49.2 (Summer 2018)

Garry Eaton gets environmental:

Several native American writers, William Least Heat Moon among them, have drawn attention to the destructive effects on the environment when the American milk and beef cattle industry fenced off millions of acres of what used to be open range, ran millions of head of cattle on it, and cultivated millions more acres of crop land for cattle fodders such as clover. From their holistic perspective, it is a very inefficient industry. This haiku slyly and humourously alludes to this massive 19th Century historical change, the closing of vast prairie frontiers, by highlighting the mindless, mower-like and digester-like efficiency of cows as in massive numbers they convert landscapes into milk and excrement in an endless search for more green.

Mark Gilbert keeps it brief:

Distinctive, quirky, a wonderful image of cows approaching a fence to investigate the strange person holding a pad and pen.

Radhamani Sarma googles:

Many a big thanks to the THF blog for having given me an opportunity to google and to know the meaning of Holstein and much more. Dan Schwerin admirably weaves strands in this haiku to drive home the idea of luck favoring the cattle in the form of leaves and flowers. Clover is usually a three-lobed plant, but with four leaves it is supposed to bring luck and prosperity to whomsoever comes across it.

The ordinary day to day event of cattle being fed on clover leaves has been given an extraordinary poetic touch, synchronising with the image of “four stomachs.”

Julie Warther ruminates:

A poem of receiving abundance! Clover in flower is above and beyond run-of-the-mill grass. It is the icing on the cake. What ruminant wouldn't be attracted? So the Holsteins come just as they are, with their four stomachs, ready to take in the bounty.

Although this haiku appears to be a straightforward “cows-enjoying-clover” poem, the unspoken question provides the resonance. . .What do we come with?

We each have our empty places looking to be filled. We hold common yearnings for love, acceptance, safety, sustenance and purpose. The natural world and those in it have much to offer. Do we come ready to receive? Do we return hungry for more? Do we have the capacity (four stomachs worth?) to take in the goodness, beauty and bounty surrounding us?

Ah! To be as open and accepting as a Holstein!

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

REVIRALS 155

no moon at month's end:
a thousand-year cedar
in the grip of the storm

— Matsuo Bashō (trans. Keith J. Coleman), *Presence* 35 (2008)

Lucy Whitehead aims for a comprehensive reading:

I thought this was a wonderful choice of haiku. As it's by Basho, I decided to see how my reading of it as a Western woman in the 21st-century might differ from how it would be read in its original cultural and religious context. I was also interested in what it might have meant to Basho.

My reading of it from my personal experience began with considering the implication of a moonless night: 'no moon at month's end'. Immediately, this suggests an absence of light and an emphasis on darkness, setting up the mood and theme of the haiku. The thousand year old cedar gripped by a storm is a very striking and powerful image. When I read it, I cannot help but visualise a giant, ancient tree being blown around by heavy winds and threatened by lightning.

To me, it suggests those dark, tumultuous times in life when you are in the grip of your own particular kind of storm. That tree must have weathered countless storms, continuing to grow despite adversity. It suggests great strength and endurance despite challenge and difficulty, and as such it is an inspiring image. At the same time, the question occurred to me, as I'm sure it does to most people in such situations in life, is this the storm that will damage or break the tree? There is still that uncertainty, that fragility of life.

I also thought that the tree with its deep roots could have been an image of Basho's Zen practice—in particular, the ability to stand firm in the midst difficult experience and whatever life throws at you and even bend with the wind as I imagine the tree was doing. He was, in fact, on one of his

long journeys when he wrote this poem. It is from his first poetic journal *Nozarashi kikou* (野ざらし紀行), *The Records of a Weather-exposed Skeleton*, a journey he embarked on in late September 1684 (Makoto Ueda, 1992, *Basho and His Interpreters*, Stanford University Press, p94; as recorded in *Matsuo Basho: The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, 1966, trans. Nobuyuki Yuasa, p54, Penguin Books). The haiku that begins his account of this journey is itself quite dark and involves the image of wind.

Determined to fall
A weather-exposed skeleton
I cannot help the sore wind
Blowing through my heart
(Nobuyuki Yuasa, 1966, p53)

In the context of such a journey, I wonder how easily natural phenomena become metaphors for one's experience? How many of us write in this kind of context nowadays? For me, the haiku above that starts his account of this journey throws light on the cedar tree haiku. When read together they resonate with each other and suggest something of Basho's own emotional experience. His mother had died the year before and part of the reason for the journey was to visit her grave (Ueda, 1992, p94) and in fact only a page after the cedar tree haiku he writes a beautiful poem of grief about his brother showing him his 'mother's frosty hairs' (Nobuyuki Yuasa, 1966, p55).

Finally, I wanted to understand the haiku more in its cultural and religious context in case there was something that I was missing without it.

"Basho wrote this hokku when he visited one of the Grand Shinto Shrines in Yamada on October 8, the last day of the lunar eighth month" (Ueda, 1992, p108). On the commentary on the same page, Tosai goes on to explain the significance of the structure of the shrine to the haiku. He explains that "The Inner Shrine is worshipped as a sun deity; the Outer Shrine, as a moon deity. With no moon, the invisible deity seemed even more august, and the poets looked up to the cedar tree as her holy manifestation". Basho

was visiting the Outer Shrine when he wrote this poem (p108). There are other commentaries, but what I thought was interesting was that without the cultural and religious context of this haiku the link between the absent moon and the fact that he was in a shrine that was worshipped as a moon deity would be completely missed (could the absent moon in the context of a moon deity shrine also be a reference to his missing mother and thus the storm his grief?).

In terms of this translation, I thought it worth noting that in other translations the word 'embrace' or 'embracing' is used (抱く — *daku*) instead of 'in the grip of'. I think the words have slightly different meanings and implications for the relationship between the storm and the cedar tree and even for the tone of the poem. It is interesting what a difference one word can make.

Finally, here is what Basho wrote (in two different translations) in the sentence before the haiku:

“The wind coming from the pine trees of the sacred mountain pierced my body and filled me with religious awe” (Ueda, 1992, p108).

“As I stood there, lending my ears to the roar of pine trees upon distant mountains, I felt moved deep in the bottom of my heart” (Nobuyuki Yuasa, 1966, p54).

Petru Viljoen notes the intransient nature:

The tree is not expected to survive the storm. The 'no moon at month's end' alerts us to this effect.

The tree has lived a 1000 years. Basho lived fifty. It befell him to witness the demise of the tree in his lifetime.

As it was growing, so was Japan. The tree survived many wars, earthquakes, tsunamis, invasions, famines and plagues. It saw the Japanese script become independent from Chinese.

A 1000 years old and it wasn't to see the end of the month.

Radhamani Sarma gets metaphorical:

Here is my humble take on haiku interpreting the pivotal image (a thousand-year cedar), both literally and as a metaphor. We have to infer in line one that there is darkness prevailing in the forest for there is no moon. What follows in the second and third line is the disaster of a heavy hurricane, blowing the thousand-year cedar with its clusters of green leaves to and fro. The poet envisioned the thousand-year-old cedar tree in the clutch of storm; the tree's strength unbending, trying its best before being uprooted, or fighting until the gale recedes. It is like an exorcist driving away the spirit.

The poet might be interpreting, metaphorically, a family tragedy in which a brother or sister is in the grip of death or ruinous disaster, but who nevertheless fights until the end. The first line ("no moon at month's end") might be alluding to the waning stage, or last journey, of man. Also, no moon, no shining, only pitch dark now, may be implying a wealthy person, prosperous until now, financially broke down and torn asunder by debtors.

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

REVIRALS 156

Octopus pot—
evanescent dreams
of the summer moon

— Basho, in *Haiku: An Anthology of Japanese Poems*
by Stephen Addiss and Fumiko Yamamoto (2009)

Mark Gilbert:

I'm somewhat wary of reading too much into a particular translation nowadays, so I decided to check out the kigo of this poem from Basho. In fact there are several translations of this haiku at Gabi Greve's <https://worldkigodatabase.blogspot.com>, my preferred resource for kigo. As with much of Basho's work this seems to have several meanings in the context of Japanese society. To me, however, L2/3 suggests the end of the life of this octopus but also the approach of the end of the summer fishing season, as well as the end of the summer itself for another year. 'Evanescent' touches on the fading colours of the octopus, and the circular pot mirrors the moon above the ocean which is perhaps foretelling this particular demise. The octopus is such an intelligent and alien organism it seems strange that it can be hoodwinked so easily. To me therefore it has a sad tone, and I do feel it's a shame we harvest them in this way.

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