

This Week's Montage

—One-Liners

Comparative Haiku

selected by

Allan Burns

How best to approximate Japanese haiku in English has always been a vexed question. The norm we've evolved is a terse three-line poem. But is there anything inevitable about this form? The standard meter of Japanese haiku, as we all know, is 5-7-5 *on*. In English, conventional practice is to start a new line of poetry after each metrical unit—so, in Shakespeare or Wordsworth line breaks follow a complete iambic pentameter unit. It thus seems sensible to adapt Japanese haiku to English in three lines; but here are two complications: First, Japanese haiku are printed in single vertical columns, so the three-line format we almost take for granted isn't the norm in Japanese haiku itself. Second, English-language haiku has never been tethered exclusively to a bulky 5-7-5 syllabic scheme, so our line breaks do not correspond with coherent metrical units. None of that's to say abandoning a three-line format is necessarily desirable; after all, practices that become separated from their initial functions can sometimes take on a life of their own, and we do have a home-grown organic model in the terse triadic stanzas of W. C. Williams' free verse. Nonetheless, there is certainly room for experimentation with other formats, and that has long been recognized. Way back in *Haiku Magazine* 5.2 (1971), Michael Segers published: "in the eggshell after the chick has hatched". The one-line form was later popularized by translator Hiroaki Sato and poets Marlene Mountain, John Wills, and Matsuo Allard. Under the influence of this group, other poets such as Janice Bostok, Jim Kacian, and Chris Gordon also became known for their one-liners. Although resisted initially, the one-line format has come to be accepted widely, its pleasurable ambiguities prized. It surely says something that the selections of ten of the seventeen poets featured in *New Resonance* 6 (Red Moon Press, 2009) include one-liners. Of those poets Jeff Stillman is probably most closely associated with the one-line format; some of his work is featured here alongside Allard's and that of the contemporary British haikuist Stuart Quine.

Matsuo Allard (b. 1949)

through a column of factory steam the white gull
 darkness across the river lights in a mill
 higher this time the last salmon
 alone at 3:00 a.m.—the door knob turning slowly
 an icicle the moon drifting through it
 passing clouds only a stand of aspens is in light
 deep in my notebook a lily pad floats away

1-4 from *Bird Day Afternoon* (High/Coo Press, 1978); 5-7 from *The Haiku Anthology*, 3rd edition, edited by Cor van den Heuvel (W.W. Norton & Company, 1999)

Stuart Quine (b. 1962)

at the crossroads autumn winds
 heading home I return the stone to the river
 moonlit the empty slot in the knife block
 ebb tide a thin rain darkens the sand
 bolted and chained the way to the mountains
 starlight the clatter of horses in the cobbled yard
 winter's end the dumped suitcase fills with rain

1 from *The New Haiku*, edited by John Barlow & Martin Lucas (Snapshot Press, 2002); 2-3 from *Stepping Stones: a way into haiku* by Martin Lucas (The British Haiku Society, 2007); 4-5 from *Presence* 31, 2007; 6 from *Presence* 32, 2007; 7 from *Presence* 35, 2008

Jeff Stillman (b. 1943)

cross-examination all morning a slanting rain
 cold moon lover all business
 wind's second wind dead of winter
 sweater mend unraveling . . . winter wears on
 briefly the heron's catch shaping its gullet
 New Year's morning the rent past due
 hazy moon hung over the new year

1 from *Frogpond* 30.3, 2007; 2 from *Frogpond* 31.1, 2008; 3 from *Modern Haiku* 39.2, 2008; 4 from *Wisteria* 12, 2009; 5 from *Frogpond* 32.2, 2009; 6-7 from *New Resonance* 6 (Red Moon Press, 2009)

Previous Montages

August 16: *Around the World*
 August 23: *The Adobe Wall*

Next Week's Montage: *California Dreamin'*

Michael McClintock
 D. Claire Gallagher
 Jerry Ball