Elizabeth Searle Lamb—New Mexico Haiku Poet*

Charles Trumbull

In addition to being “the first lady of American haiku,” Elizabeth Searle Lamb (1917–2005) was one of New Mexico’s most prominent writers. Known mostly for her haiku and her involvement in the national and international haiku community, she also wrote longer poems, many of them spiritual or inspirational, children’s books, nonfiction, encyclopedia articles, games and puzzlers for popular magazines, and even musical compositions. She was a major figure on the New Mexico poetry scene in the 1980s through the early 2000s and was highly influential among poets in the state, the nation, and abroad.

Elizabeth Searle was born in Topeka, Kansas. She completed music school at Kansas University where she trained as a harpist.

a new day —
the young harpist so proud
of her calloused fingers

She played professionally for several years with orchestras in Kansas and Oklahoma and dreamed of going to Paris to further her studies. Life and politics intervened, however: the onset of World War II made study in France impossible, while a fellow musician—a flute player—and classmate of Elizabeth, F. Bruce Lamb, asked for her hand in marriage. Bruce had transferred to the University of Michigan Forestry School, where he began his career as a tropical forester. He was hired by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and sent to the British West Indies to help build an air base. Elizabeth and Bruce were married in Trinidad in 1941 and honeymooned on Barbados.

seasalt & frangipani
saga boy rolls his mopsy
on the Trinidad beach

the boiling surf
covering uncovering
the black rock
at Bathsheba

This was the first of many residences for the young couple in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. The tropics, however, are not an ideal locale for a harp, a large and ungainly, yet delicate, instrument that responds badly to changes in heat and humidity. When they moved from Trinidad, Elizabeth had to leave the instrument with her parents in Topeka.

the harpist’s face
hidden in shadow
pale moonlight

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* This essay was extracted from a projected biography in haiku of Elizabeth Searle Lamb and published in Malpai Review (Gary L. Brower, ed., Placitas, N.M.), winter 2012–13, 118–33.
Bruce Lamb made his career locating sources of tropical hardwoods, rubber, and other exotic materials. He was also an author and wrote well-received biographical books including *Wizard of the Upper Amazon*, about a young man who was taken by an Indian tribe and eventually became its chief, and *Kid Curry: The Life and Times of Harvey Logan and the Wild Bunch* (i.e. Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid), of special interest to New Mexicans.

During World War II, Bruce was sent to Brazil to locate sources of natural rubber. He and Elizabeth at various times lived in the Amazon jungle. Elizabeth recorded some of her early memories of her life in the tropics in the form of a haibun:

**Santarem, Brazil, No. 1**

I wake very early. It is still cool. I sleep in a hammock and my back aches. One cannot turn over, even in a “matrimonial hammock.” I crawl out from under the mosquito net and open the shutters. There are no screens.

In a little partitioned-off space at the back of the house, I stand, naked, on the slatted floorboards. With a large hollowed-out gourd, a *cuia*, I dip water from a barrel, and sluice it over myself. Early morning bird song from the backyard trees.

José Maria has filled our two barrels with water from the blue Tapajós River. Ocean tides affect the Amazon here, some 500 miles from the Atlantic. At high tide muddy Amazon water flows up into the mouth of our river. He watches for low tide. He brings the water in two kerosene tins hung on a stout pole across his shoulders. This is all the water we have.

Rufina comes back from market. Her basket is filled with fruit, just-caught fish for dinner, vegetables, and a small loaf of heavy dark bread. Now she brings me abacaxi, the sweet fresh Amazon pineapple, along with toast, guava jelly, and a large cup of Brazilian *café com leite*. It is made with powdered milk. I long for fresh milk, for thick cream from a Kansas dairy farm.

A clapping of hands at the little front gate of Floriano Peixoto #4. Visitors. Two ladies in long black dresses come in. They speak little English. I speak almost no Portuguese. They ask if I have children—shaking their heads when I say no. They already know the tall *Americano, Senhor Bruce*, is my husband. They know he oversees collection of wild rubber to be shipped to America for use in war production. They know he travels upriver in a small red launch, the *Jangará*. They know he is away. They ask how much rent we pay—$7. Way too much!

I am astonished when one of the women tells me her mother was born in Louisiana. Later, I learn of a group of southerners who came here after the Civil War. They hoped, naively, to re-establish plantation life. But now we drink *cafezinho*, the tiny cups filled almost half full with brown sugar before the coffee is added. We shake hands. They leave. I never see them again. It is 9:30 a.m.
the air, heavy
my neighbor’s toucan calling
for the daily rain

During a stay in Panama, Elizabeth began writing for publication. Inspired no doubt by the arrival of daughter Carolyn in 1944, Elizabeth first wrote stories for children. She soon turned to travel pieces, which she placed in publications such as *Bulletin of the Pan American Union* in the late 1940s. She soon focused on writing short spiritual pieces, both prose and poetry, for digests such as *Clear Horizon, Daily Meditation, Science of Mind*, and *The Christian Home*. This poem, published in *Link*, was typical:

**A Challenge**

Stand tall
For the Lord:
Give him your all.

Pray deep:
Give the Lord
Your heart to keep.

Live His way:
The Lord needs you
This very day.

She continued to write spiritual pieces, even as haiku began to claim more and more of her attention.

Over the years, Elizabeth often accompanied her husband on his professional trips, such as the conventions of the International Society of Professional Foresters. She relished these experiences in often exotic locales and recorded them in her travel journals and poetry. Here are four verses from her 1966 “A Sequence from Lagos, Nigeria” and from a long haibun, “In the Peruvian Andes” (1972):

“dash me, dash me” all the kids begging ha’pennies

a mammy-wagon named *Daddy Come Soon* rattling down the street

how cold the bronze this ancient Benin warrior

into the deepest of the nightdark the talking drums

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The air is thin. The sun burns hot when the sky is clear, but often the clouds gather and mist becomes a cold rain.
a street musician
shelters his harp with pink plastic
and goes on playing

a single coca leaf
in the frayed red coca bag
bought at the market

The family moved frequently in the 1950s, following Bruce’s postings to various Latin American and Caribbean locales. Finally, in 1961 the family lighted in New York City’s Greenwich Village, where they remained for some time. They had an apartment in Washington Square Village that overlooked the site of the renowned “Bust of Sylvette” sculpture by Picasso. Elizabeth chronicled the construction of the statue in 1967 in a series of haiku, haiku sequences, and eventually a book.

the first spring rain: Picasso’s ‘Bust of Sylvette’
the ‘Bust of Sylvette’ not knowing it is a new year
streaked with it smiles in the same old way

Elizabeth had discovered haiku in the very early 1960s. Among her first compositions in this genre was this sequence written in 1961 recalling one of the places the family had lived for two years:

PUERTO RICAN HAiku

Flat on prison wall,
Strangler’s fig sustains its life,
As mine, without roots.

Bamboo grove maintains
Constant weary sibilance,
Incessant gossip.

The new moon hangs low,
Points cupped to catch falling stars,
Night’s bright butterflies.

Elizabeth Lamb responded to a notice placed by John Ciardi in Saturday Review and submitted some of her work to a new journal, American Haiku, in Platteville, Wis. Two haiku of hers were accepted for the second issue (1963) of this, the first publication outside Japan devoted entirely to haiku:

For whose wake In pine woods the sparrow's song
do the steel girders keen is pitched too low —
above the Chesapeake? only the pine tree sings.
Note that a scant two years into her haiku-writing career she had already realized the senselessness of writing in the “classic” 5–7–5–syllable format. ESL’s records show that both these haiku were cut down from longer, titled poems. Throughout her career there was a great fluidity between haiku and longer poems; she would expand a haiku or chop lines from a longer poem according to the dictates of the publication to which she was submitting. Likewise she was constantly arranging and rearranging her work in and out of themed sequences and even manuscripts for books or chapbooks, editing here and there as she went along. Her pattern was to submit a poem to several journals in quick succession and if it was not accepted, she would adjust it and send it out again. It seemed that for her any poem written had a right to be published and she was determined to see that it happened. In all, of the approximately 2,500 haiku Elizabeth wrote, more than 1,500 found a home in print, an astonishingly high percentage for any poet.

Following the death of her mother in 1975 and a brief stay in Topeka, Elizabeth and Bruce looked for a permanent place to settle and decided on Santa Fe. They plunged into the very heart of this vibrant city, purchasing a turn-of-the-[twentieth]-century adobe house on the historic Acequia Madre in January 1977, though they did not actually take up residence until autumn 1978. The old house with its casita, the Acequia Madre, and the beautiful Cristo Rey Church provided inspiration for a great many of Elizabeth’s poems.

**SIX HAIKU FOR THE ACEQUIA**

before firstlight
the wild plum blossoms
whiten the dry ditch

half silted under
the dead puppy
after spring run-off

from the dead tree
a santero carves St. Francis
there on the ditch bank

a white horse
drinks from the acequia
blossoming locust

Ditch-Cleaning Day
the mayordomo’s pickup
has a flat

ancient cottonwoods
derop their leaves in the acequia
September’s brittle wind

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how black the raven
on Cristo Rey’s Cross
Ash Wednesday

raised by a hoist
and spring songs of little birds
Cristo Rey’s re-cast bells

The city and state beyond Elizabeth’s immediate neighborhood similarly provided plenty of color for her poetry.

**INDIAN MARKET, SANTA FE**
in her bright velvet dress
a little Navajo girl
smiles shyly
Maria’s great-granddaughter
displays her own black pots

the blind sculptor
his own features
on all the bronzes
an old man
fingering a melody
on his wooden flute

beneath the portal
a summer tourist buys turquoise
to match the sky

above Atalaya Mountain
the bitter cold

Eating at the Shed …
Indian corn hanging
in the windows
contrails cross

sun-bright plaza —
Virgin of Guadalupe tattooed
on a broad bare back

cry of the peacock  the crack in the adobe wall

flute arpeggios  tangling in apricot blossoms

Music remained an important part of Elizabeth and Bruce’s life, although Elizabeth’s harp now stood unused in her living room.

yes, the harpist
no longer plays it
but even so —
wouldn’t you think she’d keep
cobwebs off the harp strings?

CONCERT AT LORETO CHAPEL

the door still closed  with candle and evergreen
a pigeon motionless  a dancer in flowing robes
on the gargoyle’s head  leads the processional

one red leaf  music of many voices
falls from a poinsettia —
the harpist tuning  floats on the hushed air
like incense
the miraculous staircase!
does the unknown Carpenter
listen unseen?
plucked strings
and the dancer dancing
before the white altar

Deo Gracias!
every voice is jubilant
with praise
from the altar candles
Light
touches the harpist’s hair

The harpist at this concert in February 1982 was Rosalind Simpson, to whom Elizabeth finally gave her beloved harp. Simpson died in October 2012, shortly after the harp found a permanent home at the Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix.

Elizabeth was always curious, and her interests ranged broadly. She found topics for haiku and other poems in all aspects of the New Mexico landscape: geology, biology, arts and crafts, archaeology, anthropology … and especially the people and places of the state.

a weaving, a crystal,
& kernels of blue corn
for her spirit journey

for Carolyn’s dead cat

Bits of red chiles
catched in her teeth, she sells
me an Ojo de Dios
Abo State Monument, N.M.

only the one cottonwood,
but inside the Santuario
still the devotions

Chimayó

the apricot
in full bloom—O’Keeffe’s
black sculpture

a plastic rose
rides the old car’s antenna—
spring morning

Elizabeth Lamb’s prominence as a poet and haikuist inevitably led to her involvement in editing and publishing and in organizational work. She was a much-sought-after reviewer of books for poetry journals, and for some years she prepared a yearly review of new haiku books. In 1979–80 she wrote a four-part history of English language haiku for the Toronto-based journal Cicada. Lamb was a charter member of the Haiku Society of America and served as its president in 1971. Her editorship of the HSA journal Frogpond in 1984–91 and again in 1994 set new standards for excellence in haiku periodicals.

Lamb was also active closer to home. She became a focal point of haiku and poetry activities in Santa Fe in the 1980s and 1990s. She was a frequent attendant and participant in public readings, especially at the Downtown Subscription cafe, when it used to host literary events.

FOUR POETS READ IN SANTA FE (SENRYU SEQUENCE)

lean, sardonic,
the west coast poet revs up
his motorcycle of words

recent poems
of the aging Britisher, dry
as his thin white skin
the balding poet
tittering as he reels off
gaylove Skeltonic doggerel

deep voice chanting
‘the way of the buffalo’
to silent drums

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ON READING HAIKU

Whatever it takes
to write
haiku
it takes almost
as much of
to read

hearing sound
on the page
and seeing shape
in the ear
but then mostly

just the courage
to let old Basho’s frog

Jump

Haiku depends on the participation of the reader in the composition of the poem to an extent equal to the contribution of the author. Accordingly, haiku is a very social and collaborative activity, and Elizabeth Lamb developed deep friendships with many other poets in Santa Fe and beyond.

In her close circle, names of Santa Fe poetry luminaries Miriam Sagan, Marian Olsen, and Thomas Fitzsimmons loom large. William J. Higginson, the preeminent English-language haiku critic of the latter half of the 20th century, and his wife, poet and haikuist Penny Harter, moved to Santa Fe in 1991 largely to be closer to Lamb, a friend from their New York City days. Lamb, Higginson, and Harter were in constant contact, and the frequent social gatherings usually featured the writing of a renku (renga), a collaborative linked-haiku poem of 18, 36, or more verses. A few miles more distant, Lamb frequently met and collaborated with haiku pioneer Álvaro Cardona-Hine from Truchas and Richard Bodner and family in Las Vegas, New Mexico.

A SPRING RENGA
by Álvaro Cardona-Hine, Elizabeth Searle Lamb, and Barbara McCauley (Hughes)

the first drops of rain
the priest thinks it’s the incense
from the sacristy

petals of apricot float
in the irrigation ditch

ACH

ESL
the old adobes
have seeds buried in their walls
centuries of them

the cricket the cicadas
are dusting off their fiddles

even in the dark
playing her flute all night
the girl with the red hair

tulips open each morning
close up shop again at night

the mare drops her foal
the Jemez Mountains shepherd
ea small herd of stars

an offering of blue corn
has been left by the hot springs

the trees pass the word
a storm hangs in the distance
birds take it from there

the bird’s song repeats itself
in the care of the lilacs

bat wings by hundreds
flowing from the cave’s dark mouth
moonrise in the east

for five years the main’s been closed
light stuns the baby crickets

now we can water
the row of morning glories
that comes with the house

from the front door the mountains
and from the back door mountains

you’d think there were more
the way the cloud’s shadows fall
upon the Sangres

each juniper has a life
to dissolve in the distance

out of the grey mist
brush strokes in a Chinese print
a wandering monk

it’s raining we run for it
get dumped on by the lilacs

more than the writing
I like how the wildflowers
stained his diary

in this faded photograph
a pretty girl with no name

a good wind going
the dog’s howl across the hill
arrives in tatters

an ant carries its partner
across yesterday’s headline

by a clear trout stream
we picnic on wine and chips
recounting our dreams

it’s the sunlight through the trees
that keeps awakening us

a morning at last
the white irises emerge
wetter than the blue

pale half-moon what’s it doing
in this mid-afternoon sky

clouds roll in they steal
the sunset we’d counted on
for our evening guests

caught without my umbrella
I forget my nephew’s name

making a big splash
Española low-rider
after the rain stops

with out compliments he says
and hands me a cherry pie

goodbye wedding dress
now the plum’s belly ripens
round a thousand seeds

a yellow balloon floats up
out of shadows by the church

when did it happen
that the pine tree’s new needles
blended with the old

forests lean toward silence
June takes a bite out of the moon
two ravens circle
above the hidden valley
scent of wild roses

the day stretches itself out
nothing begins nothing ends

Elizabeth maintained a voluminous correspondence with some of the leading haiku poets of the 20th century, notably including Fr. Raymond Roseliep (their letters are presented in great detail in Donna Bauerly’s biography, *Raymond Roseliep: Man of Art Who Loved the Rose* [The Haiku Foundation, 2015]), her New York writing partners L.A. Davidson and Virginia Brady Young, Vancouver, B.C., poet Anne McKay, and Jerry Kilbride of San Francisco. She was often moved to write memorial verses for her haiku friends, poets in the top rank of American haikuists:

**Fr. Raymond Roseliep, 1983**
opening his new book
and hearing the haiku in his voice —
I, who never heard his voice

**John Wills, 1993**
now only water sky
where the great clouds spread out
below the dam

**Foster Jewell, 1984**
sunglint
across the desert floor
and lizard’s shadow

**Ann Atwood, 1992**
out from the shore
the dolphins move with her
luminous light

**Geraldine Clinton Little, 1997**
still so clear
echo of the word
and of the song

**Robert Spiess, 2002**
high above
‘The Cottage of Wild Plum’
a V of snow geese

Elizabeth’s haiku were translated into many languages and were enjoyed internationally. Books of her work were published in China and Poland in the local languages, and major articles or book chapters appeared in Japanese and Romanian. Haiku of Lamb’s were translated into Spanish, respectively, by her pen pal Carlos A. Castrillón in Colombia and by Consuelo Luz in New Mexico for the bilingual anthology *¡Saludos! Poemas de Nuevo México:*

```plaintext
un tren ...
nieve campos absorben el ruido
una sombra negra

humo de piñón
una estrella brillante en el este
y, tenuosamente, campanas

train …
snowy fields soak up the sound
the black shadow

piñon smoke
a bright star in the east
and, faintly, bells
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She mentored a generation of haiku poets (including the current author) and pioneered in the development of an American haiku style.

Elizabeth Searle Lamb died in Santa Fe on Feb. 16, 2005. Among the many tributes received, this, from her close friend Penny Harter is perhaps the most poignant:
broken harp string—
but how the wind sings
in the cottonwood

CREDITS

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