

HAIKU ABOUT ALMOST NOTHING

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The tree within the pip

I used to own a garden with an apple tree. Unless its blossoms froze during spring, the tree always bore fruit. Then I would have beautiful apples, all of them with seeds inside — each seed containing the beginning of a new tree — of which I wrote:

In the tree the apple.
Within the apple the pip.
Within the pip the tree.

I do not claim this is a haiku, for it is rather a metaphor than the rendering of a sensory perception. It is not even the metaphor for a very original thought: the big contains the small and the small contains the big. Macrocosm within the microcosm and vice versa. Many haiku use the detail to evoke the total, the tree growing out of the pip.

I am pursuing this thought also because of my correspondence with the German haiku poet Horst Ludwig. Prof. Ludwig, who teaches in the United States, sent me his haiku:

Another morning. —
The corn has changed its colour
just a little more [note 1](#).

A slight change in colour, that is all that this haiku is about. It is almost nothing — but it says everything about the passing of time, pointing to the ripening of the corn and to the harvest drawing near. This was a haiku I immediately favoured: "It's a haiku, you might say, about almost nothing — yet it's a haiku about full existence." [note 2](#)

I felt his text had a strong relationship with one of my haiku:

The tenuous whistling
of the wind in the bottle
has come to an end.

This one too has to do with fleeting time. Maybe just a few moments have passed between hearing that whistling and realizing it's no longer there, but I thought that, in a metaphorical sense, it might also be about a full lifetime having been completed.

A mechanically caused whistling is something else again than cherry blossom or the chirping of crickets as a symbol for the transitory nature of everything, as Ludwig in turn stated in his reaction to mine. [note 3](#) He is right of course. If you are talking about the passing of time, you are talking about impermanence, which in classic Japanese haiku can often be found in the images he points at.

About *almost nothing* is Shiki's:

Look, a sparrow hopped
all along the porch
with wet feet. [note 4](#)

All Shiki noticed was the wet footprints of the sparrow and not the sparrow itself. Minutes later these prints would already have evaporated, and for all he knew there might not have been a sparrow on his porch at all.

This text is in the spring section of the anthology of classic Japanese haiku, in which I found its translation. Why it should belong there is not obvious to me. Maybe *sparrow* is a *kigo* (season word) referring to spring. However, since the volatility of the wet footprints hints at the impermanence of everything, I would rather relate it to fall (autumn).

Shiki's haiku reminds me of one by Basho, which I always have liked, though I have never really been certain why:

If you look well
a shepherds purse flowers
under the fence.

The similarity arises because both haiku have to do with the perception of something trifling. Only when noticed does the tiny, the inconspicuous exist fully. This ability to perceive is actually creative. By observing, we create the universe, including ourselves. If this sounds presumptuous, I can put it more modestly: By paying attention to even the tiny, we enhance our awareness of being part of something too big for us to even comprehend.

Other examples of *haiku about almost nothing* are Buson's:

What was it that fell
in the water, deep in the summerwood,
— a flower, a berry?

and Shiki's:

Dark forests;
did I hear a berry fall,
somewhere in the water?

In the anthology they are in the summer and fall sections respectively. In both cases is easy to see why they belong there.

There is hardly a difference between them as far as content is concerned, Buson's haiku, in which the setting is a *summerwood*, has a rather cheerful atmosphere, whereas Shiki's, with its *dark forests*, is somewhat more gloomy. This influences the perception of what both men heard: something small, falling in a pond, maybe. Buson's curiosity therefore is the more buoyant, sensing the fullness of life in the ever ongoing progress of nature. In contrast, Shiki's perception is more melancholy. The berry, if that's what he heard, falling into the water during fall may even point at a complete ending. If it does not find fruitful soil, it will not root and not be the beginning of a new cycle of life. That is: it escapes from the infinite sequence of life and death. This may sound far-fetched, but in a philosophy of life in, for instance, the Hindu conception of continuous reincarnation, it is not nonsensical at all. Be that as it may, both haiku are certainly about something as diminutive as the short and hardly audible sound of something tiny falling in water. They truly are *haiku about almost nothing*. "Drip", that's all they say, though each in a different tone.

But are such a complete wood and these dark forests really *almost nothing*? To ask this question is to miss the point. Though these references may cause you to imagine a complete landscape, the setting of both Japanese haiku has little to do with their central issue, just as the huge North American cornfields do not determine the central issue in Ludwig's text. The core of these haiku is a detail which is as trivial as it is significant. Tiny sounds in such impressive sceneries point at the passing of time and at the transitory nature of everything. In an earlier article, *Een ogenblik alstublieft* ('One moment please'), I stated that a haiku, whether it's a direct rendering of a moment experienced by the author, or a more or less constructed image, "always is an expression of or a reflection on the peculiar as much as everyday fact that everything that is, is." [note 5](#) In that respect possibly every haiku is a tree within the pip: a detail evoking something much vaster. Interestingly, that effect gets the more powerful, the more the detail is *almost nothing*.

note 1 Ludwig to the author on September 9, 1998.

note 2 The author to Ludwig on September 12, 1998.

note 3 Ludwig to the author on October 20, 1998: "Den letzten Gedanken finde ich durch den Text durchaus gerechtfertigt. Und interessant finde ich dabei, daß das sprachliche Bild, das diesen Gedanken ausdrückt, eigentlich nichts vom traditionell Biologischen enthält, sondern eher auf etwas mehr Mechanisches verweist. Die Kirschblüte und auch der Grillengesang haben für Japaner etwas Elegisches: Beide gehen schnell vorüber! Mit beiden teilen wir unsere Lebenserfahrung. Aber hier ist es ein vom Wind zufällig erzeugter Ton, ohne jeden Anspruch auf Beachtung, weil er etwa auf seine Art sehr schön wäre. Und trotzdem ist sein Aufhören ein Symbol, das den sensiblen Leser nicht losläßt".

note 4 The haiku by Shiki, Basho and Buson were taken from *Een nieuwe maan (A new moon)*, an anthology first published in 1973 by Meulenhoff in Amsterdam and regularly reprinted after that. The haiku it contains were selected and translated by J. van Toorn, who also added a very informative introduction. Though it was not the first Dutch book on haiku, it probably was the most influential in the Netherlands.

note 5 In the Dutch triannual *Kortheidshalve* VIII [1999], 3, p5.