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**Charles Hansmann**

Sea Cliff, New York, USA

**Haibunesque**

I won the 2010 Apprentice House Chapbook Award. My manuscript, *The Loneliness Jacket,* consisted of thirty linear poems. Most of these poems were originally written and published as haibun—usually a single prose paragraph with a single concluding haiku. I started writing them in 2006 and published several dozen during the following three years. But even as they were appearing in magazines and anthologies, they seemed to fall short of what I wanted them to do. My haibun were written from a poet’s sensibility, and I began to realize that they could not, as prose, fully express their content.

Working prose into poetry is not something new. Robert Frost once recommended that his friend Edward Thomas apply the practice to essays he had written about nature. W.B. Yeats often began his compositional process by sketching his topic in prose. Like Thomas, I did not start out intending to use the prose as a source for poems, and like Yeats I needed to shape my material with poetic technique in order to find a pattern of words that would carry my thoughts and feelings. The difference is that by casting my work in the haibun tradition, I willingly placed a constraint on it: for the most part I would forego abstraction and aphorism in favor of situation and setting; argument and explanation would yield to image and context. This gave my finished poems a notional unity compatible for collection in a chapbook.

The influence of haibun is evident in my book. Although the poems are structured in patterned stanzas, half of them have a concluding haiku. And though the lines are broken with purposeful intent and are worked for intra-linear effect, the line itself is free in the sense that it does not adhere to a pre-set system of rhyme or meter (though I do use meter and rhyme wherever I catch them or wherever the poem feels empty without them). The finished poems retain a coherent sentence structure and could readily be reset as prose paragraphs, but overlapping and contrary suggestions that come out in the poems would be lost if this were done.

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Ancient poetry lent itself to incantation. And passed on orally, it was more easily memorized than prose. It developed as a system of patterns, eventually using devices such as rhyme, meter, and alliteration to set up expectations of the pattern’s fulfillment. Poetry was devised to “link” (that essential haibun word) the lines of a poem one to another. In contemporary poetry, the unit of the sentence often vies with the unit of the line and the organization of the lines into stanzas. As the syntax breaks down and rebuilds, perspectives are altered and meanings shift; stanza and line become a part of the content by the way they control, suppress, heighten—even sabotage and ultimately rescue—features of the sentence. The various units—of phrase, line, sentence, and stanza—struggle within and against themselves in a way that reflects the mental activity of composition.

My first published haibun was “The Recycling Center.” I received email notice that it had been accepted by *Contemporary Haibun Online* on New Year’s Day, 2007. It has since appeared in the poetry anthology *The Light in Ordinary Things* (Fearless Books, 2009) and is included in my chapbook. Here is how it read when submitted to *CHO*:

**The Recycling Center**

My father walks slowly as we leave the house now empty of all but his needs. He tells me again the stories that were new to me when I listened as a boy, important to him again, stories of his boyhood and early setting up, by which I once learned the workings of a world that reported all its wonders. Our daily walk follows a soft lane that skirts the marsh behind a plant where discarded paper is trucked and processed. He’s tolerant of the renegade fly-aways that litter our path and points out from time to time the signs that nature takes this in stride.

a turtle poking

its nose into

an old edition

As I reworked this haibun into a linear poem I tightened the language. This could have been done while still retaining the prose paragraph. What distinguishes the poem from the prose is that the lines can be read both separately and as a part of the sentence to which they belong. This fractured reading allows for a more layered meaning. The line breaks also control the pace to greater effect and expose a hidden rhyme to accentuate the seemingly shared philosophy of the old man and the turtle, while the stanza break signals a changed focus or attitude:

**The Recycling Center**

He walks slowly as we leave behind

the house now empty of all

but his needs, his stories

important again, his youth and early setting up

by which I once learned the workings of a world

that reported all its wonders.

We follow a soft lane, skirt the marsh behind the plant

where discarded paper is trucked and processed.

He’s tolerant

of the fly-away dailies that litter our path,

points out from time to time

some sign that nature takes this in stride—

a turtle poking

its nose into

an old edition

The line breaks give the poem an increased tension, and with this tension, an increased claim on the reader’s attention. We all know the many things the aged “leave behind” (as they lose memory, ability, life itself), and in the brief moment while the reader’s eye moves down from the end of the first line to the beginning of the second, the reader might wonder which of these losses will be confronted. By the end of the second line, though it’s not expressly stated, the reader senses the lost presence of a wife and family. Read by itself, the third line equates “his needs” with “his stories,” the remembered life taking precedence over the present one. The fourth line reinforces this, telling us that what is “important again” is the man’s memory of “his youth and early setting up.” We learn in the fifth line that the speaker is apparently a son, and with the alliteration—“once,” “workings,” “world”—we hear the echo of repetition: he has heard these stories before. The final word of the sixth line, the final word of the stanza, picks up that alliteration long after it seemed to have been dropped— “wonders”—and this coincides with what the words are suggesting, that these stories are important to the son too, and that he feels nostalgic for the lost world the stories depict, or at least for the heyday of his father as a young man telling him the stories. The slowed-down pacing of line breaks (and the segmenting of the sentences into lines) is essential to glean these readings; and with the extended pause of the stanza-break, the poem signals a shift into present-day action. In lines 7 and 9 we read the only end-rhyme in the poem: “plant” and “tolerant.” It surprises us out of the old man’s mood of reminiscence to his acceptance of contemporary life. Despite our littered present, there is still order in his world, at least an attitude of order, and this is reflected in the rather formal structure of two six-line stanzas. Nature (the turtle) is resilient to the man-made mess, and the old man literally “points out from time [the past] to time [the present]” that he too “takes this in stride.”

The poem substitutes linear poetry for the prose but retains its haibun semblance because of the haiku. The line breaks are functional, not just decorative, and the haiku is essential to the completion of the poem, linking the old man to the turtle.

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Although language can be tightened without reworking prose into poetry, sometimes the demands or instincts of a poem call for a tightening that was not heard in the prose. What might be an acceptably functional part of a prose sentence can read quite flat as a line in a poem. And details that might create mood and setting in prose can seem peripheral in a poem’s sharpened focus. Transformation into poetry sometimes gives rise to changes that would lie dormant in a prose revision.

Here is my haibun “Confetti,” published in *Contemporary Haibun* in 2008. When I wrote it I had the sense that the concluding sentence and haiku had to be held off as long as possible, that they would have the desired impact only if I had laid down sufficient words to lead up to them:

**Confetti**

I didn’t know I would remember this as a time when fence posts were still wooden and their hollow knots housed a bright populous of bluebirds, a forgotten time when the hill held its own against the road. After her first year of school it seemed in the natural order of things that when my sister called out “Now!” and I looked up to our bedroom window, from all around snowflakes floated down through the hot summer day, white pieces of permission allowing me to laugh. She had worked for weeks cutting them out of her notebook, her scissors persistent beyond boredom, and stood me in the grass, and from that window above me had overturned her basket. Through the still air I heard the thin paper flakes flittering toward me, the sight and the sound. She had explained this to me all along, as she worked, telling me what it would be like. The cutout snowflakes so lazy in their fall I could see up through them her tiny white teeth as she watched from the window. When it was over the air was clear and silent again. “Jump up here!” she called down, as if now, touched by her worked miracle, magic would come easy to me.

birdnest! and threads

from my red sweater

I find there

Much condensed, and with a different title, it appears as a poem in *Poetry Ark Anthology* (2011) and in my chapbook:

**Apprentice**

Now! my sister calls, and conjured snowflakes fall

through summer heat. She has worked for weeks

cutting them out of her note book,

her scissors persistent beyond boredom,

and from that window above me

overturned her basket. The thin paper flakes

so lazy in their fall I can see up through them

her tiny white teeth bright with permission

she cannot grant. Jump up here!

she shouts down, as if now,

touched by her worked miracle,

magic will come easy to me.

bird nest! and threads

from my red sweater

I find there

The haibun was presented as a childhood memory, and in the poem I wanted to quickly evoke this idea by the sound as well as the meaning of the words. In the first two lines I looked for an internal off-rhyme—internal so that the rhymes would be in quick succession (like a child’s poem or nursery rhyme), and a bit off to suggest the slightly skewed perspective of an early memory. The poem tightened down considerably when I came up with “calls” and “fall,” “heat” and “weeks.” I dropped the long opening of the haibun because it was more setting than I needed—the poem was about this particular scene, and not about the extended ambience of childhood in general. And when I realized that the subject was not so much what happened as what the boy made of it, I knew I needed a title change. This is where the boy is learning to be a poet, this is his apprenticeship. The boy’s sister has made it snow in summer—and even though this is a “worked” magic, it feels “conjured.” The boy learns that “magic” (or poetry) does not come easy, and yet, with a slight twist, magic (the essence of the poem) can still be found by serendipity, as shown in the haiku when the boy comes across a thread from his sweater in the bird nest. Because of its rigid symmetry—two quatrains bracketed by two couplets—the structure provides a counterbalance to the whimsy, just as the girl’s weeks of persistent work counterbalance the giddy moment of snow falling in summer. The haibun may have worked as prose, but it had far too much slack for a poem. The need to compress the language mothered the invention of conflated phrases. “White pieces of permission,” referring to the cutout snowflakes early in the paragraph, and “her tiny white teeth,” coming four sentences later, find a closer link when joined in the poem: “her tiny white teeth bright with permission.” And by breaking the line there, after “permission,” the poem reintroduces the can-can’t-can of making magic. No amount of prose revision could have had this effect.

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Not every haibun reworked as a poem reads as a haibun variant. This is especially true when the end result has neither prose nor haiku. But when the change is very minimal, the similarity between the haibun and the poem shows how differently the two forms work.

Here is a short haibun that was published in *Modern Haiku* in 2008:

**The Inlet**

On the shore of the inlet we stalk a firefly blinking in a bush. When we get up close we collectively gasp. It’s caught in a web, and the spider is on it, completing the wrap—smooth as silk the last hint of day glistening on the surface.

moonrise

crickets quieting

our footsteps

Rewritten as a poem it reads as follows:

**The Inlet**

On the shore of the inlet we stalk

a firefly strobing a bush.

Up close we catch

short breath: it’s caught

in the calm of a web

and the spider is on it, completing the wrap—

smooth as milk the last

silk of day on the ebb.

The obvious difference between the two is the dropped haiku. In the haibun the link between the prose and the haiku is one of human interaction with other species. The firefly’s predicament has touched the speaker and the speaker’s companion—do they or do they not intervene? In the haiku, the interaction is equally ambiguous—are the crickets becoming quiet as the speaker and companion approach, or does the sound of the crickets make the speaker and companion stop walking, whether for fear of stepping on the crickets or for fear of what dangers might lie in the dark? This works in the haibun, but it doesn’t work with the poem. With minimal word change the focus of the poem has altered. The poem wanted its own sound, not the sound of crickets, and it wanted this in rhyme, assonance, and consonance: “stalk,” “caught”; “bush,” “close,” “catch”; “wrap,” “last”; “milk,” “silk”; “web,” “ebb.” Because many of these rhymes and off-rhymes had the distance of inter-stanza placement, they could fall at the ends of lines without sounding singsong; to some extent they had to fall there so as not to be lost. As I was setting this up, one line was too truncated, a single anapest, and needed to be doubled: “in a web” became “in the calm of a web.” I had hit on a word that seemed wrong but was right. That word “calm” changed the whole poem—a sailor becalmed in an inlet (no wind, nowhere to go), a firefly becalmed in a web with no escape. And within that “web” lies its own rhyme: “ebb.” The day’s last light (“milk”) shines on the ebbing light and life of the firefly in the web (“silk”) and on the ebbing tide in the inlet. This was actually the initial direction of the haibun before it changed course with the haiku. Man and other species share the same fate to which nature (the ebbing tide) bears indifferent witness.

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If the above example (with the prose rewritten as linear poetry and the haiku dropped) shows how differently the two forms of haibun and poetry work, a further example demonstrates how difficult it sometimes is to draw a distinction between the two forms. What happens when a haibun is reworked as a linear poem and the haiku is subsumed into the lines of the poem?

Here is how my haibun “Birthday Hike” appeared when submitted to *Frogpond:*

**Birthday Hike**

My bottle filled with mountain runoff chills me suddenly new to old skin. The uphill ache of my body sets in. Snow fell the winter I thrilled to be twenty. It’s melt I ford these decades later. Time for a breather.

scraped boots

among the polished stones

The rest makes me cold. I spill through these woods for their bounty of kindling. Where else to warm my heart but at the campfire story it’s my turn to tell?

silhouette in the hemlock

all ears

Here is how it appears in my chapbook:

**Birthday Hike**

My bottle filled with mountain runoff

chills me suddenly new

to old skin. The uphill ache sets in.

Snow fell the winter I thrilled

to be twenty. Its melt I ford

these decades later.

Time for a breather—

scuffed boots

on polished stones.

The rest makes me cold. I set

stones in a ring and spill through these woods

for their bounty of kindling.

Where else to warm my heart but at

the campfire story it’s my turn to tell—

silhouette in the hemlock all ears.

From its publication in the 2008 spring/summer edition of *Frogpond* to its chapbook publication three years later, there is no substantive change to this haibun/poem. The lines of the poem closely track the sentences of the prose, and the lines of the two haiku retain their mid- and end-positions, though now they are presented as lines of poetry. In its present form, “Birthday Hike” would not be recognized as a haibun or published in a haibun journal, even though in content and wording it is virtually identical to the haibun that was published. Sometimes we judge a form by what it looks like. But ultimately it doesn’t matter whether a journal will or will not publish a haibun variant. The important thing is what the practice of writing haibun can bring to writing of all kinds, including poetry and fiction. I am now at work on a novel. My writing is very scrappy. I get only phrases and fragments and have to string them together into sentences. This is how I write a haibun, up close rather than in overview. And this is why breaking the sentences of my haibun into lines of poetry does not feel as if I am taking the sentences apart so much as arranging them in a way that more accurately reflects how they came to me.

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Having a stand-alone book is a delight. For both haibun and poetry, the ratio of opportunity to practitioner is dismal. There are certainly more books of poetry than there are books of haibun, but there are also a lot more poets than haijin. Rewriting haibun as poems is not a way to improve the odds. In my case it was simply a way to improve the end result. But this has to do with my haibun in particular, and not haibun in general.

Most poetry books and chapbooks are published by independent or university presses, often through annual competitions judged by guest poets. My manuscript won the Apprentice House Chapbook Award and was published in affiliation with Loyola University in Baltimore. Design, layout and marketing were handled by students in their communications department, while the manuscript itself was selected by a credentialed poet (NEA fellowship, two full-length books, various prizes and awards). She cited the following lines for the blurb on the outside back cover:

Some times of day don’t show themselves direct.

They’re just reflected on

the surface, skittish

moments slinking down to drink, rippling

indistinct the instant

that we see them.

Those lines are adapted from “Slant,” a short haibun (four sentences in a single paragraph) published in *Frogpond* in 2008. The adaptation involves line break only—not a single word is changed. This holds true for the rest of the haibun and the concluding haiku as well. With this single difference of line break vs. paragraph, “Slant” provides the perfect example for comparing prose haibun (at least the kind I write) with a linear poem.

Some times of day don’t show themselves direct. They’re just reflected on the surface, skittish moments slinking down to drink, rippling indistinct the instant that we see them.

Certainly the prose captures the image, actually an imagined image or metaphor likening moments in our lives to some form of wildlife. What the line breaks add is a separate reading of the individual lines. In isolation, the lines bring an overlay of meaning to the sentence. *They’re just reflected on* suggests the definition of “think, ponder, or meditate.” Not until we drop down to the next line do we read this as a mirrored reflection. And in that line—*the surface, skittish*—we think at first that the instability lies on the flat pool of superficial reality, and we read it this way not just for the pause of a line break, but for the extra length of a stanza break. Then, in the next stanza, we have the line, *indistinct the instant,* and now we have a sense that the instant itself, the instant of realization, is uncertain. But as we drop down one more stanza we have the completed sentence and the completed thought: the moments are indistinct the instant that we see them. We can have our realizations and understanding, our insights when we actually see clearly, but they are ephemeral. Our perception of phenomena (the moment) and our insight of understanding (the instant) are the same.

It takes attentive reading to pick up on the nuance of line break, an ability to read both the sentence as it is unfolding and the individual parts of the sentence as they are laid out in their lines. The form works because the linear breaks themselves predispose the reader to give them a closer reading than might be given to prose. But even if a reader’s explication falls short of the poet’s full intent, the line breaks can still deliver the mystery of the poem. That’s part of the magic. We don’t necessarily have to understand how it works.

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A shorter version of this article appeared in *Green Fuse News* (January 2011) titled “Prose as a Catalyst to the Poem.”

**Jeffrey Harpeng**

Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

**The Jazz of Pilgrimage**

**1: How to Navigate**

We are out for a Sunday drive one Monday, public holiday. The sky is seamlessly plastered, and blue from horizon to horizon.

My granddaughter takes the map and says, “I’ll show you how to get there. First we go to Africa,” she sweeps a finger across the map of South East Queensland, “then Japan, New Zealand, and we come back past the North Pole.”

“But will we see the flying elephants if we go that way?” I ask.

“All the elephants are in the zoo, granddad.”

“And the flying ones are chained up to big balloons. Sometimes they drift away and they have to go out and round them up.”

talking about shapes

in the clouds there

are none here

**\* \* \***

Haibun and tanka prose arise from small shards of thought.

Then as mnemonic and mandala, that little idea goes for a walk. We listen and chat with our self along the way. Who knows what that other self is likely to say?

Let us travel with exuberance and creativity of language, listen for lessons in map reading. See there among the rolling grass on that hill crest the pilgrim taking time to fly a kite.

wind

rattles the eucalypts

sighs over stone

tells of all that’s forgotten

hear the branches groan

**2: Pilgrimage**

What is true of time in Christian worship is equally true of time in all religions, in magic, in myth, in legend. A ritual does not merely repeat the ritual that came before it (itself in repetition of an archetype), but is linked to it and continues it, whether at fixed periods or otherwise.

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred & The Profane*1

And to echo Eliade, what is true of time in one haibun is equally true of time in all haibun, in their magic, myth and legend. The writing does not merely repeat the world that was, but is linked to it and continues it. Jacques Roubaud, in considering haiku in particular, takes us from mythic foundations to the beginning of something infinite:

. . . a haiku was always (something I knew) open, implicitly extendable into a long linked poem, a *renku*, but that perhaps, even more so than at the start of a *renga*, a *hokku*, it was virtually infinite in the direction of the future; that is to say: each haiku was the beginning of an infinite poem, in both senses of the word: a fresh start extending all preceding haiku . . .2

**\* \* \***

Haibun and tanka prose, and haiku and tanka, are a form of pilgrimage. By pilgrimage, I mean a visit to an older story to add *ourselves* to it, or to add ourselves to it again. The burden of layered narrative is the essence of them all, even when it isn’t a foot slog on *The Narrow Road*.

Haiku and tanka are journeys of transition. In these journeys we travel, nearly as lightly as Bashō, carrying little more than our beliefs. (Such a heavy load!) The transit can be as brief as Bashō’s frog splash or can be lifetime-consuming as in these lines by Santōka Taneda:

gradually I take on the vices

of my dead father3

Haiku tell of our emotional accommodation to transition. That is the transition from the mythic foundation that Eliade intimates to the experience of infinite possibilities faced by haiku writers and also faced by hokku and tanka writers. It is haiku and hokku, though, which most pointedly and most intimately bring us face to face with the experience of imminence and the certainties and mysteries that imminence prefigures. Santōka’s haiku is both the echo and the cry from which other echoes resonate. The abstract notion of *vices* here is a human quality in the landscape of death, the death that is part of every landscape, a part of the natural world where this abstraction is grounded. It is not too far a cry from what Bashō does in his hokku:

Summer grasses

all that remains

of soldiers’ dreams.4

The following passage from *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*5sets the background for the *summer grasses* hokku. At the end of the passage, with a stagecraft effect, it is as if a curtain is drawn upon both the history and landscape, which Bashō has told in detailed and expansive sentences. The author is then alone in front of the curtain where, in his bitter reverie, a hokku came to him.

It is here that the glory of three generations of the Fujiwara family passed away like a snatch of empty dream . . . . The ruined house of Lord Yasuhira was located to the north of the barrier-gate of Korom-ga-seki, thus blocking the entrance from the Nambu area and forming a protection against barbarous intruders from the north. Indeed, many a feat of chivalrous valour was repeated here during the short span of three generations, but both the actors and the deeds have long been dead and passed into oblivion. When a country is defeated, there remain only mountains and rivers, and on a ruined castle in spring only grasses thrive. I sat down on my hat and wept bitterly till I almost forgot time.

In a nutshell, life is short, soon passing into oblivion*.* The great are now in oblivion and Bashō is not far off. This is the pilgrim’s lesson. As Bashō tells it, what remains and persists are mountains, rivers and grasses, things without mind. No wonder he sat down and wept.

The *almost*,in “I almost forgot time*,*”is shifty and quizzical. The truth of it is, he did not, he could not forget time. He is haunted by the past and the future is vacant. We go from spring grasses thriving in his prose to the summer grasses of the haiku. That is a sensory shift from vibrant with life to blanched and ghostly. In both modes, the prospect of oblivion is imminent, not only for all actors, but for their actions as well.

The haiku here is not so simple a thing as a condensation of the prose. In the prose, Basho tells of the things that prepared him to cast the hokku; he then gives us the hokku as an argument, a philosophic proposition.

The following haiku possess more benign pasts. Still, there is an awareness of “a fresh start extending all preceding haiku*,*”an awareness of passing away*.*

nearly thirty

I knead the bread

with Grandma’s hands

—Joanna Preston

postal box –

letting go

that letter

—Greeba Brydges-Jones6

Tanka add a bit of a sigh—of resignation, relief or joy—and they weigh their material with a scale that is the size of the heart, that is the heart.

when to my pillow

no friend comes

I lie alone

turned to face

the potted plum

—Masaoka Shiki7

when you call my name

so soothingly, I rise

and drift from that dream

and shiver to hear the tick

of sleet on the windowpane

—Jeffrey Woodward8

Shiki’s tanka is of the journey through illness toward death. He has been diminished, as also have his consolations, even the consolation of nature. The ‘potted plum,’ it seems, is all that stands between him and death. His intense focus on this small thing is a desperate clinging. He is writing against death, trying to hold off the future, to expand the present, with intense focus. The reader becomes his future.

Woodward’s tanka is a languid affirmation of life. The author is called from the dimensionless expanse of reverie: ‘that dream.’ In a *‘*shiver,’ anticipation switches on as he re-enters ticking-time. Where the threat in Shiki’s tanka is tangibly present, and distilled by his isolation, the future in Woodward’s tanka ticks on; it already lives in the voice of another.

Of the following two prose paragraphs, the first is an excerpt from Shiki’s *Record of the Little Garden.* The second I constructed by working from details of Shiki’s life.

“I have a little garden, eighty yards square. It is on the south side of the house . . . Here on the outskirts of the city the houses are far apart, and so there is nothing to obstruct my views of the blue sky, stretching out beyond the garden with the clouds’ goings and the birds soaring high . . .”

It is a postage stamp allotment. The sleet, which fell an hour ago, was gone as soon as it touched the ground. Since sunset, white has accumulated on white to muffle the audible world, the visible world. A narrow band of light from the house of the old biwa player next door is visible above the fence. Sometimes I hear the goddess Benten playing. Tonight she is playing an old peasant tune. When I was with the army in China I heard a homesick soldier sing that same song. I could have told this in a dispatch to my editor. Everything outside is white. The garden is a white postage stamp. The house is a letter, stamped, but not yet addressed. In the morning the least thaw will scribe an address on the tile roof. What will the report of me in this dispatch, this little house, have to tell?

The purpose of the prose in haibun and in tanka prose is to expand the vision of coming to pass and passing away or to juxtapose another vision of coming to pass and passing away. It is that juxtaposition which gives the work depth and resonance, depth being a sense of what is past and resonance the expansive experience of moving from there to what may come.

Either or both of the quoted tanka are equally viable accompaniments to the prose—to top, tail or as interference in the flow. Woodward’s tanka weighs the account with the texture of things to come and Shiki’s with things passing away.

Woodward’s and Shiki’s tanka both deal with the infinite. One is personal, is further lived narrative; in the other, the ownership of the narrative is about to change hands.

**3: On The Road**

Existence really is an imperfect tense that never becomes a present.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*

Haiku are ever knocking at the door. There is a sign on the door. The sign reads “The Future.” A yearning for the future is in their blood. They inherited this from their ancestors, waka and renga. In waka, the parts frequently pivot around *but*, *even*, *like*, *now*, *though*, *yet* and are full of *what may be* and *what will never be*. In renga, three lines want to be answered by more. And more have heard of more, and so it goes, like a sunset conversation on a holiday porch. That is, the usual constraints of time and place get slurred in rambling conversation.

Immanence is inherent in the nature of haiku, a question without a question mark. Actually, it is more of a blend of exclamation and question. This quality is predicated upon a back-story. Though sketchily presented, these back-stories are rich in connotations. The back-story is coupled with a conditional clause, which is often elliptical in such a way as to invoke us to both fill in an ordinary missing word and elicit speculation, a sense of ‘what will be.’

For example, in Joanna Preston’s haiku, the natural fill for the ellipsis would generate the simile *with hands like Grandma’s*. The shape of the hands is what we inherit, what comes through our genes. Then there are memories of Grandma’s hands. When these things are coupled, a glimpse of the future is the result.

Sometimes the back-story is not a few words you can prune out and hold up for show. In some cases, it is wholly implied, calling to mind, as in this haiku by Barbara Strang, notions of the technology produced to overcome the disadvantages of preceding technology. This haiku could be a public announcement to human endeavour:

over the loud speaker

somebody saying

something9

The back-story in the following haiku by Santōka Taneda fills the first line. These two words encapsulate a narrative going back through numerous misfortunes.

wearing rags,

in the coolness

I walk alone10

In a metaphorical and an ordinary sense, Santōka’s past dressed him in rags. The phrase “wearing rags” not only paraphrases the past; it also views the future through tinted lenses, dark ones. A back-story can be as brief as a single word, as in the following haiku by Yasuhiko Shigemoto.

Ploughing—

the smell

of the soil11

The word ‘ploughing’ has a back-story older than history. We sink down through the notion of a technological age, what is merely an exuberant expression of the agricultural age, to a change in our attitude toward the earth exemplified here in this word. How superbly the notion of ploughing is represented graphically by the lines of a haiku. ‘The smell of the soil’ reminds us of a number of things. It reminds us of how transient our awareness of smell is, how it wafts in and out of consciousness; it nudges us with the fact that ‘the smell of the soil’ is predominantly the aroma of decay, thus becoming a *memento mori* of our own sweet decay.

In these three haiku, it is the human signifiers—‘ploughing,’ ‘wearing rags’ and the problematic relationship with the loudspeaker—that initiate a sense of vastness preceding, surrounding and following us.

**4: An Argument with The Muse**

The relationship of both haiku and tanka to prose is as that of logs, boulders and weirs to a stream. Where the haiku and tanka occur, there is a sense of hold and eddy, or hold and spill over. Haiku and tanka are arguments, or parts of arguments, their own argument, or augmentations of the prose’s argument. The prose argument, the narrative stream, may be a river or a mere trickle, a road or a narrow path, and the haiku or tanka a diversion, a discursion, a disagreement or an affirmation in the discussion that is the journey. To call them arguments may not be precise or pertinent to the style of some. I find it a useful way of relating prose and verse and often, in generating haiku or tanka from the prose, to realise some small or even a substantial argument.

The following haiku is an example of what I mean by argument. For me, this haiku could be an article of faith regarding human experience and our observational capacities.

looking up

to a spider web I walk

into another12

I’ll give the final say to the following little haibun. The prose explores inaccessibility. The first haiku’s response is an article of faith as a blind couple tend their garden with earthy intimacy. The second haiku is a side-glance at an alternate way of reading the game board.

The argument between the prose and the haiku continue as they make their way on their pilgrimage, with their riffs playing off each other in playful extemporisation. They make space for more to be said.

**Between the Invisible and the Tactile**13

after Gerardo Nigenda

The photographer is blind. In this photograph his subject wears a black sleep-mask.

Where the photographer’s leading finger touches her chin there is the lightest dimpling.

Above his touch; below the mask there is the beginning of a smile.

The photographer, Gerardo Nigenda has typed in Braille across the photograph, *Between the invisible and the tangible . . .*

Nigenda said *the first letter of the text is here, but the following letters can be further along*, where the eye might scan the heavens for the next constellation, a pause for breath between here and there, *perhaps a line break*.

The Braille is in Spanish. For the blind who visit the gallery, who live in English, as their fingers track the text, there is growing puzzlement. For the sighted in the gallery the text is two languages beyond reach.

Gerardo Nigenda died at forty two; he is now, as they say, *beyond*.

Where Nigenda’s hand touches her chin the faintest tremor is the beginning of a smile.

cool of the night

the blind couple

weed the garden

four year old playing

snakes and ladders moves

up the side of the board

**\* \* \***

**Notes**

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred & The Profane* (Harvest Books, 1968).

2. Jacob Wren attributes this to Jacques Roubaud,

<http://radicalcut.blogspot.com/2010/03/jacques-roubaud-on-haiku.html>

3. “gradually I take on the vices” from *Mountain Tasting—Zen Haiku by Santōka Taneda*, translated and introduced by John Stevens (Weatherhill, 1980).

4. “Summer grasses,”translated by Lucien Stryk, from *On Love and Barley—Haiku of Bas*hō (Penguin Classics, 1985).

5. The prose excerpt of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa (Penguin Classics, 1968).

6. “nearly thirty” by Joanna Preston, and “postal box” by Greeba Brydges-Jones, from *Listening to the Rain—an anthology of Christchurch haiku and haibun* (The Small White Teapot Haiku Group, 2002).

7. Shiki’s tanka and haibun extract from *Masaoka Shiki* by Janine Beichman (Kodansha International, 1986).

8. “when you call my name” by Jeffrey Woodward, from *Modern English Tanka* (Volume 2, Number 4—Summer 2008).

9. “over the loudspeaker” by Barbara Strang, from *Listening to the Rain.*

10. “wearing rags” from *Mountain Tasting—Zen Haiku by Santōka Taneda*, translated and introduced by John Stevens (Weatherhill, 1980).

11. “Ploughing” by Yasuhiko Shigemoto in *Blithe Spirit—Journal of The British Haiku Society* (Volume 11, Number 1—March 2001).

12. The haiku “looking up” is from the haibun “Between the Pages” and appears in *Notes from the Gean.*

13. “Between the Invisible and the Tactile” appeared in *Paper Wasp* (Summer 2011).

**Bob Lucky**

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

**On Stanley Pelter’s *An Abundance of Gifts***

***An Abundance of Gifts* by Stanley Pelter.  Easton, Winchester, Hampshire, U.K.: George Mann Publications,  2010.  6” x 9”, perfect bound, 134 pp.  ISBN 9781907640056. Enquiries: Stanley Pelter, 5 School Lane, Claypole, Newark NG23 5BQ, U.K. Email: spelter23@aol.com.  For members of the British Haiku Society, please enclose a cheque for 1.50 pounds; or $3, or 2 Euros for the cost of a padded envelope and postage.  For the public, the price is 8 pounds + 1.50 pounds p&p.**

Although Stanley Pelter’s new collection of haibun, *An Abundance of Gifts*, is part of an ongoing series—this is the sixth in the series—I will be treating it alone, eventually. There are certain things the reader needs to know about the series. It is meant as a gift, literally, as Pelter says in the preface to the first volume, and if you like it you can share it. And if you feel inclined, you can make a donation to the British Haiku Society. Pelter is aware that most readers of his book will be in one way or another connected to some haiku group or at least interested in the form. He is obviously, and rightly so, less certain that even among that select group, many will not know much of the haibun form.

Consequently, in the introduction to volume 1, *past* im*perfect,* Pelter gives the reader some definitions of both haiku and haibun and forewarns of the breaking of rules, not to start a revolution but “to delimit parameters, raise questions, extend boundaries, and covertly glance at issues that drift about behind the shadows of acceptable consensus” (9). In volume 2, *& Y Not*, Pelter forcefully argues that times have changed. This is where one gets the sense of some sort of revolution stirring, partly because he raises more questions than he answers. Whenever haibun, my own, start to smell a little off, I go back and reread this introduction. One may not agree with all he says, but it makes you think, and if you’re writing without thinking, or at least not thinking about what you’re feeling, well, I’m not sure that’s writing. To bolster his point and echo part of what he said in the introduction to volume 1, Pelter quotes Jacques Derrida on genre: “As soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And where limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind” (3).

As if to smooth a few ruffled feathers, Diana Noel begins her introduction to volume 3, *insideoutside,* by reminding the reader that “Conventionally, haibun, a genre in its own right, is a hybrid that combines the poetry of haiku with prose of at least simple language and short sentences” (1). However, only occasionally does she refer to the work in this particular volume as haibun, preferring instead to call it prose/poetry, story poem, and story. This is an important theoretical point in the series. The author and others familiar with the project are at pains to make clear what haibun is while simultaneously demonstrating how Pelter’s work is enhancing that form by delimiting the parameters. Readers have to be taught or somehow learn to read genres unfamiliar to them. Haiku rarely resonate with readers unfamiliar with the form. And haibun? The often narrative and autobiographical nature of the prose can allow the reader access to the form, but do readers of Pelter’s work need to know anything of haibun to appreciate them? I would say no. But to better appreciate them, yes. It’s one of the many layers in his work.

John Daniel wrote the introduction to volume 4, *slightly scented* short lived *words and roses*. We are back to calling Pelter’s pieces haibun but are now describing haibun as prose plus haiku and/or tanka. And this volume does include a fair number of tanka prose pieces as well as pieces that incorporate both haiku and tanka. Daniel brings up the multiplicity of definitions that writers and readers of haibun have to contend with and the thorny issue of how much allegiance the writer must show to the Japanese origins of the form, but primarily focuses on the work itself, the theme of “the ravages, lusts, loves and aspirations of the male in Western society” (2). In the introduction to volume 5, *Vermeer & a stony beach*, Izzy Sharpe continues this trend of focusing on the work itself, only once reminding the reader that haibun is “a definition, rule-laden genre” (2). Sharpe also addresses the visual arts aspect of Pelter’s haibun, something that clearly puts his work in a unique relationship to haiku, haibun and haiga. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say the visual aspects add to the uniqueness of Pelter’s haibun.

Pelter has written the introduction to *An Abundance of Gifts.* It’s a bit like a warning to the reader that the haibun within are going to be challenging. Many of Pelter’s haibun are challenging, and not just those in this volume. He forces you to read differently—to read aloud so that you hear it, to tilt the page one way and then the other, to squint, to twist your lips and tongue into positions they don’t often go, to focus, even to close your eyes. As he himself advises, “Underwater swimming, eyes sometimes open, sometimes not, is as good a way to approach them as any, and as with visual arts, ‘messages’ may be multi-layered” (2).

An innovation in this collection is a series of found prose and music haibun that the author likens to the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp. His selection of various prose (and poetry) and musical pieces, to which he adds haiku, usually, is predicated on their “propensity toward some kind of haibun vision and ethos” (1), allowing that this may distort things too much for some readers and stimulate others. The distortion will be in direct proportion to one’s own haibun vision and ethos, assuming the reader has one. Personally, I found these found haibun stimulating, inspirational. I already have an idea for one; the risk is in letting the inspiration sink into poor imitation. I doubt if anyone will ever write haibun the way Pelter does, and I doubt that is what he would want. He’s tearing down the walls, so to speak, and has no intentions of taking the bricks to build another.

At the far end of this distortion of vision, which is just another way of seeing, are two of the found music haibun. “Little Bird” is part of a score by Edvard Grieg (6/8 time, key of F, I believe) accompanied by four haiku, two single-spaced and two double-spaced, as well as sketches, possibly clip art, of musical instruments and a musician at the end. Now, I can only read music if I know the melody—in other words, not really. Nevertheless, the relationship between the score and the haiku seems very haibun-like to me. And when I read the haiku and look at the score, “shapes on a page/notes reform themselves/into a near bird” (42). I look at the clusters of 32nd notes rising and falling and see flocks of small birds. I get my wife out of bed to play it for me on the piano and I hear bird song—“music abstraction/makes a deflected image/trill soundalikes” (42). This is the multi-layered aspect to which Pelter refers. However, I can’t access the ‘messages’ in “polonaise op 40 no 1,” a partial score with sketches of instruments and musicians. No haiku or tanka here to help the ‘reader.’ Moreover, it’s not grouped with the found haibun or even identified as such.

But this is part of any art experience. Not everyone is going to decode a work in the same way. In fact, sometimes the reader will find ‘things’ the author didn’t know were there, which is why I wish Pelter hadn’t in the introduction given us a run-down of “the contents and interior themes” of some of the haibun. “3 bears—or what!” is a case in point. I won’t tell you what the author says it’s about, but to me it’s a clear indictment of the hollowness or illusion of choice in contemporary global culture. Poor Goldilocks (who doesn’t appear in the haibun, by the way) would still be trying to choose a porridge if she went shopping today.

If Pelter had put Goldilocks into that haibun, chances are good she would have been having a dialog with someone, or at least an internal dialog. This is a prominent feature in Pelter’s haibun and something that quickly draws the reader in. There’s a little Samuel Beckett in the exchanges between characters, a little Spike Milligan, as in the following excerpt from “is nothing sacred, even?”

“What do you mean what do I mean?”

“*What do you mean? What do...?*”

“I mean disputatious. I mean unable for all time of time to stop even questioning questions. Have I, perhaps, got it wrong? If I have, then Moses is possibly as good a masked-up guy as anybody to ask”.

“*Surely you mean Moses as a metaphor, a stand-in fall guy.*”

“Does it matter? Just let me beg to differ.”

“*You really are something else.*” (66)

Such dialogs occur in several of the haibun here, including “lost seal,” “mostly most days,” “the man who would be king,” and “rumours, of course.” Characters in search of meaning, you might say. I think to experience fully much of Pelter’s work it pays to approach it as one would Kafka—submit to the irreality, enter the landscape and abandon the desire for meaning. Remind you a bit of reading haiku and tanka?

One of the enjoyable aspects of reading Pelter, at least for me, is indulging in ‘influence spotting.’ The author helps by listing many of his influences in the introduction. I’m in no way qualified or even competent enough to comment on the visual aspects of Pelter’s haibun. I can point out, of course, his use of various fonts and the inclusion of portraits and what for a lack of better words might be called Rorschach-like doodles. I would blush to tell you what I sometimes see in those. Nevertheless, I sometimes see the ghost of Mervyn Peake, the late illustrator and novelist, especially in the drawing for “Notebook series—number 1” (and more so in earlier volumes than in this one). And if someone pushed me to describe Pelter’s literary style, I would say he is to haibun what the Icelandic painter Erró is to painting. Both, in the consistent juxtaposition and superimposing of images, tell tales that demand to be ‘read’ in more than one dimension. One might argue that Pelter’s haibun are a type of super-haiku. Challenging? Definitely. Rewarding? Only if you take the challenge.

**Patricia Prime**

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**“White & Red”: My Beginnings in Tanka Prose**

Long before I began writing tanka prose, I bought a copy of *Love Songs from the* *Man’yōshū.* The tanka were selections from the Japanese classic, beautifully illustrated by Miyata Masayuki. A couple of the tanka stayed in my mind, particularly Yamabe Akahito’s tanka written in the 8th century:

*The plum blossom  
that I thought I would show to my man  
cannot be distinguished now*

*.from the falling snow*  
  
—Yamabe Akahito  
(*Love Songs from the Man’yōshū,* Vol.8, #1426)

For some time I had been writing prose poems and haibun and believed that I could follow Yamabe Akahito’s verse with some prose of my own, to add a further dimension to the poem.

About this time, Jeffrey Woodward contacted me to ask if I would be interested in joining him in contributing to a tanka prose blog which he was setting up with a view to encouraging tanka poets to combine their poems with prose. With the help of Jeffrey’s invaluable criticism, “White & Red” was one of the first pieces I wrote containing tanka and prose.

This is an ekphrastic poem that responds to an image or a visual medium. “Ekphrasis is the graphic, often dramatic description of a visual work of art” (see the article “Ekphrasis” on Wikipedia). It can be applied to a painting, sculpture, poem, photograph or any inanimate object. It depends upon a secondhand image, rather than on a person or place. The poem doesn’t merely replace the original, but adds something in its language and feeling that takes off from the original and talks back to it. “Ekphrasis, then,” one scholar writes, “has a Janus face: as a form of mimesis, it stages a paradoxical performance, promising to give voice to the allegedly silent image even while attempting to overcome the power of the image by transforming and inscribing it” (see Peter Wagner, ed., *Icons-Text-Iconotexts:* *Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality*, New York: de Gruyter, 1996, p. 13). A poem that is based on a work of art will succeed insofar as it comes to terms with the recognition that it should make a revelation.

The more one tries to define what constitutes an ekphrastic poem, the more slippery it becomes. If you consider that all poetry is to some degree, and in some way, both found and shaped by the poet, and dependent on the poetry that has preceded it, identifying the ekphrastic poem may seem a redundant exercise. Nevertheless, many poets deliberately present specific poems, based on the work of artists or poets, in the knowledge that they can add an intriguing layer to the original work by writing their own poem based upon it. One may think of poems such as John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” John Ashbery’s “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror” or William Carlos Williams’ “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.” Poets may produce such poems in order to shock or amuse, to be playful or serious, to add further to the art work, and anything in-between. The poems may counter a loss of faith in the ability of language to represent the art work; or provoke one to re-view the piece of art and the world it represents, whether psychologically, politically or culturally.

As a poet, I’m often looking for new ways in which to form a poem. The idea of combining two modes of writing—poetry and prose—was common in classical Japanese literature and early examples of it can be found in works by Ki no Tsurayuki, author of the *Tosa Diary* (or *Tosa Nikki*), circa 940 ME, or by the “the mother of Michitsuna,” the presumed author of the anonymous *Gossamer Years (or Kagerō Nikki*), circa 974 ME. Tanka prose was first composed in Japan as an extended form of memoir, diary, tale, travelogue or even history, accompanied by a tanka. It may take various forms, built upon a common basic unit of one paragraph, one tanka. Tanka prose in English is now gathering momentum, with outlets for publication in *Haibun Today, Atlas Poetica, Kokako*, and other journals.

Tanka prose is considered to be a poem because of its intense, condensed language and its use of tanka, or because of some other similarity to poems in verse. Often it may be difficult to distinguish a short story from a narrative tanka prose poem. But this blurring of genres is an incitement to experiment.

My tanka prose poem is poignantly voyeuristic as it concerns the passion observed between two people, who in the midst of a cold winter’s evening find themselves alone before the heat of a fire. The focus on the apparently incidental, accidental and conventional can in fact shine a bright light on the heart, often one brighter than a more serious, cliché-prone approach. Beneath these unsatisfied desires lies a concealed truth: anything can be conjured from its opposite. So here we have the emotional opposites of heat and cold, and that of colour: white is the colour of virginity, of snow, and red the colour of flame, fire, heat and the foretaste of the redness of plums:

a serene painting  
white on white  
not the red  
of plums that will ripen  
when we meet in autumn

The word “white” is a symbolic way of saying “snow” or “ice,” or talking about an unsolved emotion. “Red” in its vagueness could imply blood (against the whiteness of skin) rather than heat. What does it really feel like, I asked myself, to be cold, chilled, to have lost someone one loves, compared with the pleasure the lovers have inside the house, with its warmth, light and music. Outside in the snow, it felt like a yearning for something that was lacking in my life, creating a desire not only for heat, but for self-ignition, a flare of glowing inner stimulation or inspiration. And where is that to be found? At that moment, it was to be discovered in the observation of two people in love.

The writing of such a tanka prose poem represents a gradual dawning as I advance in knowledge of myself, from the loneliness of gathering blossoms to the happiness at seeing the love between the couple before the fire, and therefore the poem ends on a positive note. My wish is that my poem enters into a dialogue with the original Akahito poem, reacting, re-imaging, re-creating and answering back.

The poem is personal in subject matter based on my own loss and the experience of seeing my children grow up and fall in love. However, it has a distinct directness in its tone and language, which strikes an intriguing balance, widening its perspective and providing scope for a reader’s involvement.

**White & Red**

*The plum blossom  
that I thought I would show to my man  
cannot be distinguished now*

*.from the falling snow*  
  
—Yamabe Akahito  
(*Love Songs from the Man’yōshū,* Vol. 8, #1426)

early spring  
the snow falls softly  
on white blossoms  
this evening alone—  
how cold it is  
  
a sprig of flowers  
I pick to place in  
an emerald vase  
bends under the weight of snow  
fallen in the night  
  
a serene painting  
white on white  
not the red  
of plums that will ripen  
when we meet in autumn  
  
I admire the flowers  
the faintest tick of snow  
against the window  
red roses sprinkled  
on a white duvet

Nightfall—I approach the house. Through the lit window I see a man in a cashmere jumper, a woman in a white evening dress with a string of pearls around her neck. Her hair the black of a raven’s wing, her lips painted scarlet. They sit side by side in front of the piano, playing Mozart with two hands—their free hands around each other’s waists. Discarded outer clothes lie in a heap beside the fire. On a table, an open bottle of red wine and two glasses . . . I stand watching these two people immersed in each other. They’re friends of mine, arrived early for dinner. I’d left the door open when I went to gather the blossoms for a table piece. They’ve let themselves in—two people playing solely for each other.

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