

Windfall plums: a few words about haiku



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I.

Last summer, out of the blue, I started writing haiku again.

It began, auspiciously enough, at a Zen monastery. I had gone with my family to a week-long retreat at Plum Village, the centre near Bergerac, France, founded by Vietnamese Buddhist monk and poet Thich Nhat Hanh. Something in the way the buildings stood their ground, the stylistic fusion of east and west, recalled my long-lost California of childhood holidays at my grandparents' house near Monterey, set amid redwoods and live oaks. With no distractions, real-life or electronic, and feeling no particular call from the Dharma teachings on offer, I spent the week mostly just wandering about, without any real aim except to practice the art of just happening to be in the right place at the right time, and to record what I found there. Life was suddenly vast, empty, and hopeful. And into this space poems began to fall like – well, like windfall plums.

rain on the roof
of the meditation hall –
did i zip my tent?

Plum Village

by the zen garden
a stashed bottle
of hot sauce

Plum Village

2.

My first flirtation with haiku was twenty years ago now. I knew very little about the form, but it attracted me for reasons that were as much practical as philosophical. I was on an extended tour by bike in the American southwest, from Colorado to California, and needed something to occupy my mind as I was riding. Haiku were short and simple enough to compose and revise in my head during the long empty miles. My haiku were pretty rough around the edges, though genuine and from the heart, but one of them later won a prize which paid for the trip: £500 for a two-line, seven-word poem – probably the best rate of pay per word I’m likely to receive in my life. Of course you could call it a fluke, and perhaps it was; but I took it as a hint that a life of integrity might, in fact, be a viable proposition. I’d gone on the bike ride and written those haiku just for their own sake, and now here I was getting paid for it.

Needless to say, no lucrative lifestyle beckoned as a haiku poet (nor any other kind, for that matter). In fact winning the award was a serious blow to my writing, since for years afterwards I judged whatever I wrote by the arbitrary standard of that one success. Still, I continued to come up with the occasional haiku while doing my best to live a life of integrity. I hope I can say I’m still fighting to a draw on that one.

in the desert
there is no soundtrack

Hopiland, October 1996¹

3.

Haiku is, or are, probably the most misapprehended of all major poetic forms. Every literate person more or less knows what makes a sonnet a sonnet or a limerick a limerick, but the only thing everyone 'knows' about haiku – that it's a Japanese poem in three lines with five, seven, and five syllables – tells you nothing meaningful about the form. In Japanese, haiku are normally written on one line rather than three² and don't necessarily conform to the 5-7-5 rule.³ And over the past fifty years the form has transcended its Japanese origins via an explosion of haiku in other languages, including, of course, English, in which a syllable can be as short as 'a' or as long as 'strength'. Most English-language haiku are either very flexible with the syllable rule or else ignore it completely; many have three lines, but there are plenty with only one, or two, or even four. As befits its Zen roots, haiku is a formless form. It's not form but spirit that makes it haiku. There is no better expression of this spirit – nor, I think, of the 'uncivilised' writing championed by Dark Mountain – than that given by Basho himself:

Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn. Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one – when you have plunged deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden glimmering there.⁴

In spirit, haiku is universal. An Irish monk of the ninth century scribbles in the margin of a sacred manuscript:

How lovely it is today!
The sunlight breaks and flickers
on the margin of my book.

translated from the Irish by Thomas Kinsella⁵

The manuscript is doubly illuminated, and so are we.

4.
But you'll look in vain for haiku in most collections of English-language poetry, aside from dedicated haiku publications that preach to the converted. You're more likely to find pseudo-haiku or meta-haiku: light verse that apes, mocks, or comments on the form of haiku, diligently counting syllables as it goes, while mostly ignoring the spirit. One meta-haiku by Adrian Mitchell might stand for the whole:

Haiku? Too easy.
Everyone knows poetry
Should be difficult.

from *Blue Coffee, Poems 1985–1996*

If 'writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down',⁶ then haiku – once you quit counting syllables like a dutiful child – is like playing tennis with no net, ball, racket or court; in fact, nothing to show the onlooker that you are actually playing a game rather than just standing in a field. Nothing to cling to; nothing to get a handle on. Who would watch a game like that? No surprise, then, if haiku makes people antsy, especially the people whose job it is to judge, edit and compile poetry. Simon Armitage, introducing his anthology of

short poems, writes, 'I felt a strong obligation to include at least one haiku, and for that reason have not done so.'⁷ Well, quite.

As the poetry teacher says in Chang-dong Lee's sublime film, *Poetry*: 'It is not difficult to write a poem; what's difficult is to have the heart to write it.'

5.
The remarkable thing about my summer was that the still space which had opened up – still and empty despite being full of frogs, dragonflies, sunflowers and crescent moons – stayed open for far longer than it had any right to. We returned home, and became immersed in household routine; we went on holiday to the south of Spain, to the beach and the mountains, and came back again; the harvest season heaped us with a glut of tomatoes, squash, windfall apples and plums. And during it all I seemed still to be passing through one real live moment after another, living in each one in turn. I don't mean that I was aware of living *every* moment of every day – that would be too much – but still, there was no end of moments, all clamouring to be recorded and become part of my personal mythology of time. During the summer I wrote, oh, a couple of hundred haiku, I suppose. As to whether they are of any literary merit, or have a true haiku spirit – I can't say, and in any case I'm hardly the one to judge.

by the woodpile,
last winter remembering
next winter

Voto, Cantabria, August 2015

dusk:
swifts swoop low
over the motorway

Castilla-La Mancha

redhanded –
stealing
a mulberry

Las Alpujarras, Granada

late camp –
only the moon's
wry smile

Las Alpujarras, Granada

at the zoo,
girl picks blackberries
through a chainlink fence

Cabarceno, Cantabria

6.

Not until the autumn did the space begin to close. The children started new schools; we moved into a flat in town (temporarily, as it turned out); the many teeth of civilisation – street grids, traffic, noise, newspapers, work, paperwork, shopping, timetables, grades and constant electronic distraction – began to grind me down. I gradually stopped writing haiku and became mildly depressed. That was nothing new, but now I was conscious, more than ever, that what I had always called depression was really just another name for the all-pervading *repression* of the Machine. I still keep that awareness, the harvest of last summer.

pavement wet –
from her umbrella drops
small change

Laredo, Cantabria, September 2015

Notes

1. still haiku award, autumn 1998. Published in *still, a journal of short verse*
2. 'On translating haiku in one line' by Hiroaki Sato. From *Right under the big sky, I don't wear a hat. The haiku and prose of Hosai Ozaki*. Stone Bridge Press (Stone Bridge Press, 1993).
3. For example, Basho's seminal 'autumn crow' haiku, which consists of nineteen or twenty syllables in different versions.
4. Basho, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and other travel sketches*, translated and with an introduction by Nobuyuki Yuasa (Penguin, 1966).
5. From *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, ed. Thomas Kinsella (Oxford University Press, 1986).
6. Robert Frost, in a speech given May 17, 1935.
7. *Short and Sweet: 101 very short poems*, ed. Simon Armitage (Faber and Faber, 1999).