PLEIADES
BOOK REVIEW

Writing Degree ∞ (On Recent Haiku)

by Michael Theune

on the following:

Hipster Haiku. Siobhan Adcock. Broadway Books, 2006.
She Was Just Seventeen. Billy Collins. Modern Haiku Press, 2006.
Gnoetry. Eric Elshtain & John Trowbridge. www.beardofbees.com
Listen to the Landscape. Linda Nemec Foster & Dianne Carroll Burdick. William B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 2006.
Hockey Haiku: The Essential Collection. John Poch and Chad Davidson. Thomas Dunne Books, 2006.
Office Haiku: Poems Inspired by the Daily Grind. James Rogauskas. Thomas Dunne Books, 2006.
Haiku Mama. Kari Anne Roy. Quirk Books, 2006.
Wheat and Distance. Austin Smith. Longhouse, 2007.
Baseball Haiku: The Best Haiku Ever Written about the Game. Edited by Cor van den Heuvel & Nanae Tamura. W.W. Norton, 2007.
Redneck Haiku (Double-Wide Edition). Mary K. Witte. Santa Monica Press, 2005.

I admit it: it is preposterous to write a review of recent haiku, especially when that review engages the kinds of haiku suggested above. *Redneck* haiku? *Hockey* haiku? Aren't many of these the kinds of books for sale at Urban Outfitters, intended to be gag gifts and stocking stuffers, destined to end up as germ-catching browsing material on the tanks of toilets? They are; I admit it.

But such poetry, the *fact* of such poetry, *can* be very infor-

mative. At the very least, these books should be a useful reminder: for many, they offer up a kind of poetic essence: pithy reflections on the way things are, put into a fixed form. But more than just another reminder of the low regard the general browsing public has for poetry, such a state of affairs can get us thinking more broadly and more critically about how supposedly sophisticated poetry consumers conceptualize haiku, and perhaps, more largely, poetry. For no matter how much more sophisticated consumers of contemporary poetry might try to distance themselves from this conception of haiku, seemingly more sophisticated conceptions of haiku are intimately involved with this debased conception. Very often the idea of the haiku as a pithy formal reflection serves as the rhetorical straw man stand-in for "that kind" of haiku, establishing a clearly problematic standard against which one's own clearly more sophisticated aesthetic appears—surprise!—clearly favorable. However, this process most often only results in acceptance of what, when compared to the bad haiku they are supposedly so different from, are pretty clearly only different kinds of bad haiku. Thus, by considering popular haiku we can get a better understanding of one mechanism used to think about haiku, a mechanism we may want to critique, and maybe even correct, in our consideration of haiku, and, by extension, perhaps even of poetry more generally.

My own relationship with haiku is informed but somewhat distant, and even a bit resistant. But for a reviewer, this may be good. Though I'm not a regular practitioner or devotee, I know of many of the traditions and customs surrounding haiku and I'm aware of issues currently up for debate in the contemporary American haiku community—for example, whether or not a haiku requires a season word to keep it from becoming a "pseudohaiku" (in *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*, Lee Gurga, editor of Modern Haiku Press, states that it does)—but I am not convinced that such traditions or debate really are the most important conversations to be having about haiku, and in fact they may mask deeper troubles for, and more interesting ideas about, the haiku.

Instead, I bring to this review the following perspective: I

think most haiku are pretty bad, kind of boring and self-indulgent, but I have read some haiku that knock me out, that take off the top of my head, that floor me. However, such great haiku never seem to obey established categories: they are not written in one particular era or school, or by one particular poet; some do and some don't have season words. The greatness of haiku I admire is rare but shared, and this seems to me the essential data of haiku. Finding out what contributes to the greatness of those various great haiku is then the most important consideration; all other considerations are secondary.

There is of course much in haiku to dislike. So many haiku seem too earnest, too precious, too pretty, too wise. That is, so many haiku are of the kind one finds in *Listen to the Landscape*:

> The Fence
>
> Necklace of landscape
> Charting your destination
> Home beyond earth, sky
>
> *
>
> The Road to the Father's House
>
> It weaves its way through
> Your life. The quiet path filled
> With trees and shadows

Published by Eerdman's, a Christian publisher, *Listen to the Landscape* is filled with such spiritual generalizations, which, combined with the carelessness of their composition—it is not clear how a necklace charts a destination; a path is not *filled* but rather *lined* with trees—come to seem sanctimonious and self-indulgent. While, of course, much of the responsibility for this work belongs to poet Linda Nemec Foster, who elsewhere has written some admirable poetry, Foster did have difficult material to work with. Her haiku are written responses to Dianne Carroll Burdick's hand-painted black-and-white photographs, included in the volume, and these images are extremely pat: the

content of the photographs (lots of shores and skies, lots of trees and dunes, a birdhouse, a barn) is clichéd; the style/perspective (everything in the middle distance) is staid; and the coloring (brown for trees, blue for water) mostly just fills in and reinforces the photograph rather than adding a new dimension to the original images. No vibrant, new, startling, resonant writing could faithfully reflect these images. Such images could not inspire, for example, a haiku like (in Robert Hass's version) Issa's "A dry riverbed / glimpsed / by lightning," with its magical fitting of its jagged jigsaw images. Burdick's images' nostalgic, softening glaze clearly leads to Foster's haiku, which are inevitably a wash.

For so many, though, the writing in *Listen to the Landscape* exemplifies haiku; it is exactly what they were taught haiku are: some nature and some wisdom packed into seventeen syllables, into three lines of five, seven, and five syllables, respectively. Of these supposed characteristics of the haiku, the 5-7-5 form most needs to be investigated, for it is both the most problematic and the most prevalent aspect of haiku. At best, the 5-7-5 is an inaccurate translation of a form. As any reputable recent book on haiku makes clear, what count as syllables in Japanese and in English are so different that the word count of a Japanese 5-7-5 haiku is about 3-5 words less than that of the average 5-7-5 English haiku—a major difference in the short haiku. At worst, the focus on 5-7-5 permits and encourages an empty formalism. It precisely is the 5-7-5 form which supposedly ties all works written in that form to a supposedly long and deep haiku tradition, and it is this understanding which allows one to write sloppy haiku like those in *Listen to the Landscape* and think they are successful.

And yet, the 5-7-5 form persists. As Lee Gurga notes, "The number of people who are aware that haiku is not simply a form has risen dramatically, but it sometimes seems that the number of people who are unaware has risen faster." A central reason for this is that it is the haiku's form that almost everyone gets taught in school. In forewords, acknowledgments, and author's notes, a number of authors included in this review cite their early formal education as a key part of their development as a

writer of haiku. If such education is—barely—forgivable as a kind of grade school counting exercise, it is unforgivable at higher levels—as in, for example, David Caplan's *Poetic Form: An Introduction*—in which the haiku still is considered essentially a 5-7-5 construct.

The 5-7-5 form persists as well in all the haiku meant to satirize or play off of venerable haiku. Though sanctimonious haiku involve a self-righteousness that virtually requires a rebellion, in the works reviewed here that rebellion *never* is formal. Though those who write pop culture haiku—Gurga would call such haiku "pseudohaiku" or else "zappai," zingers—often try to make clear that their work somehow really does belong to a deep haiku tradition—some recognize that not all haiku are pretty, that, as James Rogauskus notes in *Office Haiku*, Issa wrote haiku about flies making love, that, as Siobhan Adcock notes in *Hipster Haiku*, haiku are "kind of terse, old-school, and no-bullshit"—and though some even recognize that not all haiku *must* have seventeen syllables, *all* pop culture haiku use the 5-7-5 form. And so this is what so many popular books of haiku supply: seemingly strange, incongruous content put into the standard 5-7-5 form, the sign that they are participating in the haiku tradition. In this way, pop haiku revise only slightly the original thinking of the sanctimonious haiku. If the thinking behind sanctimonious haiku is represented in the following equation:

(nature + spiritual generalizations) x haiku form = visionary poem

Then pop haiku adjusts this just a bit:

$$\frac{\text{(strange material x haiku form)}}{\text{the infinitesimal value of self-righteous haiku}} = \text{large quantity of wacky fun you'll want to share with interested parties}$$

Though the overarching conceptual juxtapositions of such books may seem funny—redneck haiku and hockey haiku are such campy ideas that (as ideas) they are really cool, and so are all the as-yet-unrealized ideas: Nascar haiku, S&M haiku, K-Fed haiku, etc.—the actual literary results, however, are, sadly, the

same as those of the sanctimonious haiku: generally awful. They are so for many different reasons. While a very different kind of review might consider the role of passive-aggressive behavior on the part of the givers of gag gifts—it is shocking how mean-spirited these books can be, especially *Office Haiku*, which imagines beating a supervisor to death with a coffee mug and refers to coworkers as "freaking idiots" and "soulless / Smiling backstabbers"—or perhaps just consumer indifference—as revealed in the thought processes of someone who purchases *Hipster Haiku* for a niece who lives in Brooklyn, who, if she really is any kind of hipster, will hate this book—here, what is most important to consider is how unthrilling the actual poems really are. So often the haiku in these books don't go anywhere, don't do anything. Consider *Office Haiku*'s "Thank you for your rude / Interruption; you've destroyed / A quarter hour's work," and "Old people shuffling / Precariously with food / Trays; rolling roadblocks." Or *Hipster Haiku*'s "A bar's authentic / Only if it contains some / Old Polish guys, drunk," and "Coffee-table stacks: / *Wallpaper**, The Believer / and Lynda Barry." Consider *Redneck Haiku*'s "Bobby Lee's new shirt, / bright orange, real chick magnet, / reads 'Wal-Mart Cart Crew,'" and "Patsy's wedding dress / was bought at her ex-boyfriend's / Stepmother's yard sale." Most often, the result of reading any single one of these poems is, as Lee Gurga says is the response to so many boring, if virtuous, efforts at haiku: a tired "so what?"

At times, however, the poems in these books do add up to something more than dreck. When the poems work, most often they only approach something like the wisdom one might find in a thought-a-day calendar or a joke, but this, at least, is work, work that involves the orchestration and accomplishment of skillful reversals, the revelations of ironies. Read in contrast to the terrible poems above, the ironic reversals and sudden reveals in *Office Haiku*'s "Dark, bitter, tarlike / You'd think it would kill someone / To start a fresh pot," in *Hipster Haiku*'s "I know, that's life, but / It sucks to hear songs you love / Selling minivans," and in *Haiku Mama*'s "Screaming, crying, puke; / yelling, threats, then just chaos. / Great birthday party" seem to rival the most deft maneuverings of the English language's greatest wits.

Of course, the seeming success of such poems likely has as much to do with their contrast with the awfulness of the poems around them than with any virtue inherent in the work. Thus, in a book awash in bile, *Office Haiku*'s "Windowless office. / Some days it would even be / Nice to see the rain" seems emotionally open, and unlike the overwhelming inanity that surrounds it, *Redneck Haiku*'s "Clifford nearly starves / when pranksters hide his food stamps / under his work boots" seems impossibly complex. More often, though, the situation parallels that found in *Hipster Haiku*'s "My sardonic wit / Doesn't translate in e-mail / That's why I'm alone": the sardonic might come through, but the wit often doesn't translate into the haiku, and a reader is left alone with her distaste.

This negative response is so universal in reading these works that it is tempting not to pay any attention to the actual subject of the books when considering these poems. The boredom such poems create transcends their subject matter, and perhaps even points to a greater commonality among these works. What allows people to think such work is worthy work? While a part of this answer might be the supposed subject of the specific work (cubicle life, Brooklyn, the silliness of white poverty, motherhood), a big part of the answer is other bad haiku. As much as one might hate to admit it, such haiku simply are not as bad when contrasted to work such as *Listen to the Landscape*. In effect, this makes all of these books, regardless of their various titles, Bad Haiku Haiku.

Hockey Haiku is the most self-aware of all of these bad haiku haiku. Written by John Poch and Chad Davidson, two poet-teachers—Poch edits *32 Poems Magazine* and teaches at Texas Tech University; Davidson is the author of *Consolation Miracle* and teaches at the State University of West Georgia—*Hockey Haiku* is very aware it is just fucking around, and it turns this awareness of its own weakness into its strength. *Hockey Haiku* doesn't try genuinely to authenticate its poems as real haiku, but rather it clearly tries too hard, to a parodic extent, presenting itself in a variety of ways as a kind of open hoax. Some of *Hockey Haiku*'s back cover copy reads: "The greatest collection of hockey-related poetry…ever published, and a

watershed moment in American letters." The book's lengthy introduction, offering details about the theory, practice, and history of hockey haiku, is a spoof of literary introductions, referencing and echoing through its focus on the three great masters of hockey haiku—including one Søren Bash-Øferdehedde—Robert Hass's work in his *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa*, making necessary mention of that paragon of haiku literary theory Roland Barthes, and excoriating as often as possible the rival Winnipeg School of hockey haiku theorists.

All of this silly theorizing, however, ends up being a lot of work to keep things running pretty much as they always have, to offer up in the end the same kind of generally disappointing reading experience as in books like *Hipster Haiku*. Though Poch and Davidson are very aware of their use of the stereotypical 5-7-5 form—and so they offer a variety of reasons for having "reinstated the syllabics," including recovering "a good deal of prehockey haiku history" and noting the way the form's three lines mimic the three periods of a hockey game, "with the mid-period being elongated by the short intermissions on either side"—on a poem-by-poem basis, *Hockey Haiku* is only slightly better than any of the others. The bulk of this book is boring; take, for example, "If I had a dime / for each of their broken bones, / I'd invest in dimes," or "Some claim curling is / Canada's national sport. / Curling. What. Ever." This troublesome situation is compounded by the fact that *Hockey Haiku* seems to have, at different times, different notions of its reader. At times, especially in the section called "Pindaric Haiku," in haiku such as "Detroit's new savior: / Cujo's mojo in the pipes. / Hasek can't hack it" and "Pimpled recklessness: / a winger with bad acne— / it's Langenbrunner," the reader is clearly thought to be a hockey fan who can catch and care about these references. But a section called "Metahockey Haiku," with haiku such as "Huffy Henry hid / the puck. Uncheckable, he / was uncheckable" and "All the new thinking / is about hockey haiku. / Like the old thinking," offers hockey haiku for readers of poetry. No matter whom these poems are aimed at, though, it's hard to imagine any reader being terribly impressed by poems such as these. The good hockey haiku, the ones that stand out

from the rabble, are those that have that wit, a sudden unexpectedness: "About suffering / they were never wrong: old guys / stuck in the minors," and "Men at forty learn / to close softly the lockers / they won't come back to." Admittedly, there may be more, but, not a big hockey fan, I just might not be in on the joke.

Though Poch and Davidson ask and answer, "Hockey haiku, then / volleyball villanelle. Next? / Limerick de luge," it is very likely that those villanelle and limericks will not ever be written. It takes patience to write and read a villanelle, and readers demand of limericks that they actually be funny. Thus, the haiku is the perfect hoax form. Its relatively simple form seems substantial, seems to tie its instances in with a long literary tradition, but it only seems so: haiku really are popular because they actually make little to no demand on those writing or reading them. Certainly, at moments, the authors of the above books note that there are potentially other demands a haiku must meet, such as including a season word, but those demands can always be overridden; only one cannot: the strict adherence to the 5-7-5 form. The individual haiku need do nothing so long as it contains the 5-7-5 form and its subject matter involves the book's overarching concept. Beyond this, all an individual haiku's intrigue comes from its not being one of those stupid, sanctimonious poems we were forced to read and write in grade school. And this of course leads to the acceptance of many really bad poems.

However, this way of thinking isn't just prevalent in the realms of popular books of haiku. Such thinking has permeated seemingly more-sophisticated and theory-savvy views of haiku. Reviewing *The City Visible: Chicago Poetry for the New Century* in a blog entry dated June 13, 2007, Ron Silliman singles out, along with just a few other works, for comment from that anthology the following poem:

> I will fuck you up.
> Come back here motherfucker.
> You 'bout to get served.

Silliman notes: "This poem by Luis Urrea is, among its other virtues, a perfect haiku. Urrea's fabulous ear for the vernacular is almost enough to make me love this form for the first time in decades." Here, it is Language poet and star blogger Silliman and not, say, the author of *Redneck Haiku* speaking, but the theory upon which such a pronouncement rests is the same as that which might produce a *Redneck Haiku*: all it takes to write interesting, and even perhaps "perfect," haiku is some startling content plugged into the 5-7-5 form.

The 5-7-5 form maintains such a perverse hold on the poetic imagination that in "2084," a poem from Linh Dinh's *Jam Alerts* about a nightmarish, Orwellian world filled with products such as "[b]one soap, pubic hair cigs, grass tea…egg / And sperm substitute, shit substitute," includes the following stanza:

> Shit, ma, ain't got shit
> To eat round here, not even
> Some jive shit. [haiku]

It is both terrifying and hilarious to think that even among such debasement people would take such pathetic pride in stretching a statement by an extra two syllables in order to reach the somehow magical 5-7-5 combination.

But it shouldn't be surprising. The 5-7-5 form is likely to be around for some time as it is the form that has been most inviting to those interested in making the composition of poetry a technological undertaking. In 1968, Margaret Masterman and Robin McKinnon-Wood exhibited a program called "Computerized Haiku" at Cybernetic Serendipity, the first major exhibition of computer art, held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. Though the original program and hardware have been lost, Masterman wrote an essay in 1971 called "Computerized Haiku" in which she describes the creation of the program, and that essay shows that in her thinking about the haiku, the easy 5-7-5 form comes first: the essay begins, "A Japanese haiku is a three-line poem of 17 syllables with the following line pattern: / Line 1: 5 syllables / Line 2: 7 syllables / Line 3: 5 syllables." (However, this essay reveals that

even this easiest bit of information can be mishandled: according to Masterman's essay, early versions of Masterman's and McKinnon-Wood's program employed an incorrect 7-5-5 form.)

In an essay titled "Computer Poetry's Neglected Debut," Wayne Clements tells how he worked from the "verse structure and lists of words to fill it" revealed in Masterman's essay in order to make a version of computerized haiku. (This program is available at www.in-vacua.com/cgi-bin/haiku.pl.) By pressing the button for "Random Haiku," one can create poems such as, "All blue in the spring, / I trace grey leaves in the dawn. / Flick! The bud has smashed," and "All green in the ice, / I trace white trees in the shade. / Whirr! The moth has blown." Neither of these poems is very good, but this result would not surprise Masterman, who has some real questions about what her program is capable of. Noting that computer graphics were far more advanced than computer poetry, she states, "In poetry, we have not as yet got the generating formulae; though who would doubt that a poem, any poem, has in fact an interior logic of its own?" And so she considers her own work just a start: "The analytic attack made upon the Japanese haiku…in order to computerize it, represents a first attempt to get the glimmer of a glimmer of what the interior logic of a simple poem-form could be like." While she notes that "[a] true poet might make inspired choices, even when handling the toy haiku"—though she never defines what would constitute an inspired choice—Masterman notes quite clearly that by using her program one will make "a great many mediocre poems."

For better or worse, the failures and perhaps the scant potential of Masterman and McKinnon-Wood's program largely has served to encourage other poets and programmers to try their hand at making haiku-producing programs. Most recently, poet Eric Elshtain and programmer Jon Trowbridge have created Gnoetry, a twenty-first-century computer program that allows one to select one of various poetic forms and then fill in that form using word combinations gathered from an archive of out-of-copyright texts available on the internet. Additionally, it is possible in Gnoetry for the human poet to delete portions of

the poem and "regenerate" textual possibilities for those problematic sections.

Though Gnoetry now allows for the creation of a wide variety of forms, according to a presentation at the &Now/Lake Forest Literary Festival (Spring, 2006), it all started with the haiku's 5-7-5. And 5-7-5 haiku are still being made. Here is the haiku that opens *Field Test One: A Record, through Poetic Artifacts, Concerning the Events of March 9-10, 2001*, composed by Gnoetry and a group of human authors: "He was lit the lamp. / He tried to get behind her. / This cultural stage." Though a bit more jazzed-up, a bit more *au courant*, such writing is still fairly mediocre. The reason for this is simple: for all its upgrades—in Gnoetry, there is more room for linguistic variety and choice, more possibility to make seemingly very different kinds of haiku—there is still no method in place to guide inspired human decision-making.

However, unlike Masterman, Elshtain and Trowbridge seem convinced that Gnoetry, as-is, produces something special. Although there are many arguments against these ideas—in Gnoetry, humans seem to make a lot of decisions, and even many intuitive, snap judgments, and so Gnoetic products still often seem suffused by mind—according to "The Gnoetic Manifesto," Gnoetry is an almost mystical "novelty-creation device" by and through which "[l]anguage is moved away from the tyrannical subject of human cognizance." Ultimately, though many sources and influences are cited in the Manifesto—among them: Oulipo, Language poetics, and hypertext theory—what the Manifesto proclaims is that Gnoetry can automatically produce zero-degree writing, the colorless, neutral language championed by theorist Roland Barthes. In Barthesian fashion, the Manifesto opens with a proclamation of the death of the author: "Language is a prosthesis of an ancient neurochemical regime; but now the chemical author is dead. Gnoetry places language at a remove from its typical sources: pre-conscious governance, psycho-historical flux, conscious-mind narration." And, referencing Barthes's notion of zero-degree writing, it asserts that "Gnoems [poems created using the Gnoetry program] create a linguistic representation that exists near the

zero-degree of validity."

This reliance on Barthes, however, is in itself problematic—especially in the realms of haiku. If leaning on bad haiku doesn't guarantee the production of good haiku, leaning on Barthes's problematic theories about haiku cannot greatly boost the value of Gnoetry's literary productions. In *Empire of Signs* Barthes creates a utopia in which to play with and further consider and promote his own theoretical notions. Barthes's utopia, an imaginary Japan, is a paradise of empty signifiers, and in four chapters of *Empire of Signs*, including "The Breach of Meaning" and "Exemption from Meaning," the haiku is addressed. Clearly, though he says his haiku resemble "nothing at all," Barthes's haiku really are meant to exemplify his zero-degree writing; he states that "…the haiku functions at least with a view to obtaining a *flat* language…what is posited is *matte*." What Barthes's haiku are meant to stand for is even clearer when one considers what Barthes contrasts the haiku with. The haiku that Barthes wants are not further examples of Western writing, writing that "moistens" everything "with meaning," that does all those things that Westerners tend to do with language: define, describe, add commentary, "instruct, express, divert." Additionally, Barthes is against how "the Western commentator…seek[s] at all costs to construe the haiku's tercet (its three verses of five, seven, and five syllables) as a syllogistic design in three tenses (rise, suspense, conclusion)…"

Though Barthes's theoretical commitments are clear, this theory becomes problematic when one examines the actual haiku he includes as examples. A few—*very* few—of these haiku, such as "In the fisherman's house / The smell of dried fish / And heat," really do seem to be a kind of zero-degree writing, but others, such as "(I saw the first snow: / That morning I forgot / To wash my face.)" do not. This latter example of haiku seems very much like a haiku that involves development: it portrays an event, reveals a powerful effect of that event, and even incorporates the skillful, rhetorically powerful elision of the connective, *(And I was so amazed by this event that….)* And it is not to falsely moisten the haiku with meaning to say so—it seems clear that this is how this haiku works.

The effect of the inclusion of this and other problematic actual instances is rather devastating for Barthes's theory. It suggests massive flaws in Barthes's theory. For example, Barthes is (or should be, though he doesn't own up to it) really only talking about certain kinds of haiku, the kinds of zero-degree haiku he is particularly intrigued by. But there may be reasons why Barthes mixes the kinds of haiku he discusses: the kind of haiku Barthes's particular theory should focus on may not be the most interesting at all—one wonders if Barthes's theory would be so intriguing if his chapters on haiku were filled with more poems like "In the fisherman's house," a "so what?" haiku if ever there was one. Additionally, because upon inspection these haiku appear to be gathered not so as to exemplify a stated theory, one begins to look for reasons why these haiku were presented, and the only factor joining the actual haiku included in *Empire of Signs* is the fact that almost all were written by established masters, such as Basho and Shiki. Even though among poetic forms the haiku especially challenges the notion of the author—Gurga states, "In haiku, the focus is on what the poem says rather than who wrote it. Thus haiku is a natural antidote to the 'cult of personality' that permeates much of contemporary culture"—far from challenging the Author, Barthes's theory of the haiku ends up reinforcing the power and the presence of the Author.

While Barthes's problematic theory and its vague aesthetic have been influential—they have not only underwritten the production of Gnoetry's mediocre Barthesian haiku, but they also seem to be behind the haiku writing in John Ashbery's "37 Haiku"—far more influential, though perhaps negatively for the haiku, has been Surrealism. Haiku has suffered more from Surrealism than from any other theory or aesthetic.

Though haiku is popularly known mainly for its form and content—nature and wisdom, or a send-up of that expected content, in 5-7-5—haiku very much involves the art of juxtaposition. In *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*, Lee Gurga includes a section on juxtaposition in haiku, and it contains sections on cutting and pivot words in haiku, vital if sometimes subtle moments in the poem where the haiku, tending in one direction, breaks open onto something new. If, though, the aesthetic of juxtapo-

sition may once have been something rare and so perhaps something fairly unique to the haiku, juxtaposition is now, due in large part to the rise of Surrealism, a common poetic technique. Simply put, Surrealism's churning out of juxtapositions overwhelmed haiku's often more subtle, singular juxtapositions.

Mostly. There is one kind of juxtaposition that brief haiku can do very well, a special kind of careful juxtaposition, one that creates a leap that is both surprising and oddly fitting. In fact, some Surrealists were advocates for just such a kind of juxtaposition. After noting that all are well aware of the image of a bird in a cage and that it doesn't take too much to make this image surreal by putting something—anything—incongruous in that cage, Rene Magritte says, "…[B]ut though these images are strange they are unhappily accidental, arbitrary. It is possible to obtain a new image which will stand up to examination through having something final, something right about it: it's the image showing an egg in the cage." In *Nord-Sud* (March, 1918), Pierre Reverdy offers his own formulation of this particularly magical juxtaposition, stating,

> The Image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison, but from two realities, more or less distant, brought together. The more the relation between the two realities is distant and accurate, the stronger the image will be—the more it will possess emotional power and poetic reality.
>
> Two realities that have no relation whatever cannot be brought together effectively. No image is created. An image is not strong because it is brutal or fantastic—but because the association of ideas is distant and accurate.

That some central thinkers about fitting surprise should have affiliation with an art movement so interested in juxtaposition should not be a surprise; however, such thinking can be found in various sources. According to Barbara Herrnstein Smith, in *Poetic Closure*, something like fitting surprise is the essence of wit: "[a] hyperdetermined conclusion will have maximal stability and finality; and when these qualities occur in conjunction with unexpected or in some way unstable

material…the result will be *wit*—which, as many have observed, occurs when expectations are simultaneously surprised and fulfilled." And numerous commentators have linked such wit to other genres. In "Reading Blind," Margaret Atwood notes that a story "comes closest to resembling two of its oral predecessors, the riddle and the joke" when it delivers something that is "at one and the same time completely unexpected and inevitable." In "'Mom's on the Roof': The Usefulness of Jokes in Shaping Short Stories," Antonya Nelson cites "appropriate incongruity" as the state one aims to arrive at in both great short stories and great jokes, and Nelson cites Flannery O'Connor who says that "the real heart of the story" lies in some element, "an action or a gesture," that is "both totally right and totally unexpected." I learned of the Magritte quote from the discussion of literary integrity in Annie Dillard's *Living by Fiction*.

But fitting surprise does not necessarily create wit. In "Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry," Randall Jarrell makes no claims about the kind of poem he is discussing when he writes: "A successful poem starts from one position and ends at a very different one, often a contradictory or opposite one; yet there has been no break in the unity of the poem." When discussing why it is so difficult to write a good play—not clarifying whether the play is a comedy or tragedy—Arthur Schopenhauer notes that the difficulty is the ending, when "[w]e then demand that this outcome shall be achieved naturally, fairly and in an unforced way—and yet at the same time not have been foreseen by the audience." One can even detect elements of fitting surprise in discussions of the sublime: in "On the Sublime," Longinus calls for "bold experiment in language," yet he notes that such bold experiments must be framed to suit very particular occasions.

And such ideas have even found their way into talk of haiku. In the section of *Haiku: A Poets' Guide* called "Juxtaposition and Working with Images," Lee Gurga, after citing another commentator on haiku who calls the interaction between two images the "heart of haiku," writes, "Others have likened the space between the images to the gap in a spark plug:

if the space is too small, the charge leaks out. If it is too wide, there is no spark. When the gap is just right, the result can be electrifying."

Here is one haiku—Hass's version—I find electrifying:

The snow is melting
and the village is flooded
with children.

Delivering "children"—where the literalist would expect "water," the formalist might expect "lots of water," and the formalist Surrealist would demand "burning giraffes"—in that last line precisely places Magritte's egg in its cage.

Here's another electrifying haiku—again, Hass's version:

Deep autumn—
my neighbor,
how does he live, I wonder?

Wallace Stevens calls a poem not the statement or the explication or the description but the "*cry* of its occasion"—the poem should both fit, or be of, its occasion, but it should also startle or exceed that occasion, like a sudden cry. "Deep Autumn—" enacts this notion precisely: in the setting in which leaves have fallen, the speaker suddenly sees a neighbor's house, and this chance observation startles the speaker into a profound inquiry.

Such gorgeous poems are not the inevitable workings-out of obvious syllogisms and nor are they random jolts. Such poems are not moistened with meaning; nor are they flat and neutral; and nor are they simply, easily surreal. They are something else altogether. Though they dwell between and among all these states they are vastly more than a mere composite—they are apotheoses. Of course, not all haiku work this way, but when they do, they offer something profound: a complete poem that clearly emerges as something singular from the general babble of the archive.

However, far from being just some distant aesthetic, fitting surprise offers a foundation for radical critique. Due to the simple fact that no one person, or genre, or aesthetic school has a

corner on the phenomenon of fitting surprise, fitting surprise can help to call into question many problematic theories or ways of thinking about and valuing haiku, including any view of haiku—perhaps obscured by overarching juxtapositions, lesser generic demands, or any notion of "master" or "Author"—that doesn't take the experience of reading one single haiku seriously. Additionally, the more structural demand of fitting surprise quite clearly reveals the vacuity of 5-7-5 form, which in contrast to fitting surprise comes to seem merely formal and not a real, substantial, interesting demand to be made of haiku. Additionally, while it is not clear that any computer program has yet been designed that could reliably produce poems of fitting surprise, fitting surprise offers up a notion for someone trying to figure out the deep "interior logic" of the haiku or what might count as an "inspired choice" when playing around with a computer program to try to make a good haiku.

As all of this suggests, the notion of fitting surprise also reveals a demand to revise pedagogy. Ezra Pound—famous for, among many other things, composing what he called the "hokku-like sentence" of "In a Station of the Metro"—writes: "No man [sic] ever writes very much poetry that 'matters.' In bulk, that is, no one produces much that is final, and when a man is not doing this highest thing, this saying the thing once and for all and perfectly…he had much better be making the sorts of experiment which may be of use to him in his later work, to his successors." Though fitting surprise may not be the only way to write a haiku that is high and perfect, it is one of the ways, and this idea should be more widely disseminated. Haiku teaching strategies should be revised so that they pay less attention to syllable counting and instead encourage students to create fitting and surprising linkages. Surrealist techniques of play and collaboration should be used as a vital part of this process, but they will be known to be clearly successful only once they achieve fitting surprise. Though André Breton critiques Reverdy's formulation of the distant and accurate Image in the first "Manifesto of Surrealism" by dismissing it as an "*a posteriori* aesthetic," this need not be a concern for the creation of haiku in which *a posteriori* judgments are an integral part of

the creative act. Evaluating and throwing away haiku—what genre is more disposable?—is a key feature of the haiku writing process, according to Lee Gurga, who says that only about one in every one hundred haiku are any good. Such work—play with an effort at making fitting surprise—and not the facile fitting of language into a fixed form should be taught early on as an essential poetic act. Certainly, this will be more demanding on teachers and students but it also will promote the creation of haiku that actually seem worth writing. And so much bad writing, and the bad reactions to such writing, might this way be avoided.

A disruptive challenge to the status quo, fitting surprise crops up when and where it wants. Sometimes, it appears where you might expect it, as in *Baseball Haiku: The Best Haiku Ever Written about the Game*, an anthology skillfully compiled in part by Cor van den Heuvel, the editor of the excellent *The Haiku Anthology*. Including haiku such as Arizona Zipper's funny "A harvest moon / every eye turned / to a running bunt" and Bill Pauly's "country field— / homerun rolling / past the headstones," this is the kind of book that one could feel comfortable purchasing for a favorite baseball fan/poetry-lover. However, one haiku in particular sticks out in this collection:

> summer loneliness
> dropping the pop-up
> I toss to myself

This poem, by Ed Markowski, flirts with pathos: in the first two lines, it seems the poem is about to deliver a clichéd story about a young person shunned because of his inabilities in athletics, but this narrative gets completely revised in the last line, a line that both deepens the speaker's loneliness but also creates a great symbol of that loneliness, catching it beautifully.

Billy Collins, one of our day's reigning wits, incorporates a good deal of playfulness in his haiku chapbook *She Was Just Seventeen*, some of which rises to the level of fitting surprise. As the chapbook's title suggests, Collins sticks very closely to the 5-7-5 form, breaking from it mostly only to make a joke of it;

reminiscent of his distended, intentionally unruly "American Sonnet," one haiku reads, "On a cold, bright morning / a white swan // flew across the lake / and passed through my heart— // something that should have / taken me only seventeen syllables to say." And, in fact, the best poems in this collection take up the haiku poet's obsessive syllable-counting as part of their subject. "I count syllables / on my fingers as I walk / past the frog-less pond" is a funny combination of comic build-up and deflation. But the chapbook's best haiku is "Innumerable / raindrops on the reservoir— / I stop to count some." This is a haiku about a privileged moment, about a privileged perception—the poet will now perceive something for the reader—but the poem itself also *is* just such a moment: encouraged by the last line, one goes back to check the syllable count of "innumerable," and suddenly, this poem sparkles. Certainly, there are innumerable words in the archive, but in certain rare combinations, they truly catch our attention and glisten.

Fitting surprise also comes from sources we may not expect. Austin Smith is a young poet—he's just beginning his MFA at the University of California, Davis—who so far has only published two chapbooks. In his second chapbook, *Wheat and Distance*, a small but gorgeous—it consists of one page that unfolds vertically—letterpress book from Longhouse, he delivers some haiku of amazing, intense images: "Beneath the shade tree— / a roll of barbwire / the auction missed," "Bankrupt tavern— / all the darts / crammed into the bull's-eye," "Last week of summer— / no one owns / a favorite skipping stone." But, again, one haiku really sticks out:

> In the garden
> all morning, tending,
> being tended.

That reversal/reveal in the last line seems extraordinary: it is unexpected but fits; it is vast, but subtle. This haiku, this aphorism that reveals a dawning revelation, reminds me of something Randall Jarrell—again, in "Levels and Opposites"—states: "The generalizations most akin to poetry…tend to be paradox-

ical, contradictory, ambiguous, in form as well as in content; I am talking about those proverbs or apothegms which reach their height in the sayings of Blake or Christ or Heraclitus: *Time is at the mercy of Eternity*; *To men some things are good and some bad, but to God all things are fitting and proper*; *If a seed die*…and so on. If these are not short poems, what are they?"

Immediately following this question, Jarrell states, "We must remember that it is essential relationships, not any entities or external forms or decorations that are really *poetic*; all the clouds and flowers and Love and Beauty and rhyme and metre and similes and alliteration that ever existed…are not, in themselves, enough to make one little poem." Translated into the language used in this essay, Jarrell could be taken to say, as well, that all the form in the world could not lead to a haiku, but when you've got a significant relationship between parts of a haiku—perhaps not only when fitting surprise is present but almost certainly when it is—you've got a worthwhile little poem.

Even if that poem is found in *Redneck Haiku*. Deep in the pages of that virtually degree-absolute-zero book, in and amongst matte language such as "Interstate rest stop. / Lunchmeat sandwiches, fried pies, / ice cold grape Nehi" and "Wanda and Flo spend / most Saturday nights playing / Bingo at Elks Lodge," comes a haiku soars above all that dreck:

> Broken toys in yard.
> Traveling Bible salesman
> Knows he'll get this sale.

In its effort to dutifully fit the 5-7-5 form, this poem suffers a bit from its missing articles and so sounds like translationese, but that is a minor problem, easily fixed by reading the poem as saying "the yard" and "The traveling Bible salesman." But, beyond this, this poem is brilliant. Its linking together of the outward signs of poverty and disheveled lives and a willingness to sign onto—if only for the space of a salesman's visit—a more spiritual existence precisely creates a relationship at once both distant and accurate. Mary K. Witte's haiku is doubly interesting because it also can be read as a symbolic representation

of the problematic situation of haiku. With so many broken haiku lying around, haiku become open to any suggestion about what to do about this situation, ready for any overarching ideology to come along and make things seem better—though what such ideologies most typically do is leave things just as they are: though now it's got a rationale, it's still the same mess.

This situation, of course, also largely is the situation of poetry in general. And so, if this essay's arguments seem persuasive in regard to haiku, one might try applying them to other sorts of poetry. My own sense is that the results will be very similar. Decades ago, when Marianne Moore wrote in "Poetry" of poetry that "I, too, dislike it," but also that "[r]eading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in / it, after all, a place for the genuine," she provided the ethos and the argumentative lineaments for a review such as this one. This review revises Moore's approach to and assessments of poetry just a bit: disliking much haiku, and yet reading it with a perfect contempt for it—and for the ways the contemptible is theoretically prized—one can find in haiku a place for, if not the genuine, then at least the genuinely great. Perhaps it is time now to turn again, in a systematic way, this deep and radical skepticism—and the hopeful searching that is at its core—back onto all of poetry.