16TH REDTHREAD HAIKU SANGHA:  5-8 OCTOBER 2012   TY'R GAWEN, TYWYN

Gathering around the long table in Jane's cosy farmhouse kitchen, we greeted old friends:  Ken Jones (facilitating), George Marsh (cooking), Jane Whittle (hosting), Jonathan Buckley, Meg Griffiths, Jim Norton, Stuart Quine and Kim Richardson;    also two friends new to this sangha:  Heather Dyer (poet recently arrived in Aberystwyth) and Jane Spray (already well known to most of the group through retreats with John Crook and Ken).    We expressed regret at the absence of Bill Wyatt, unable to attend for health reasons, and read aloud poems which he had sent to the sangha:

Pushing seventy

growing old on wine and clouds

eyes dim and teeth few

Too old to know better –

but each time I look at it

the moon seems new

and Bill’s versions of haiku by Saito Sanki:

Lasting forever

laughter from distant

withered moors

From the far shore

there’s a man – the cold wind

brings us together

Warmed by the AGA, accompanied by the cats and surrounded by paintings, textiles and family photos, we toasted the 16th Redthread event with wine and good food, relaxed if weary after long journeys from various parts of the country.

As always on the first evening, Ken led us in formulating the programme for the weekend, more or less adhered to.

Our first morning sit in the half-light of the sitting room:

between tick and tock

urgent reminder

pressing down

as the sky dawns

sitting alone

together

Then after breakfast an interesting variation to Ken's usual exercise of commenting on published haiku.  This time - from a selection of UK and American journals -  we each chose one which we found touched us in some way that was 'existentially liberating'.   These included:

on holiday

staring at the ballast

in a rusty barge

wind in the wheat, wheat in the wind

a shot of brandy

and the autumn moon becomes

a Kerouac haiku  (from Bill Wyatt)

silence

waiting for stones

to breathe out

september twilight

a dark tangle of kelp

drifts out to sea

letting it run

through my fingers

cold winter sun

sunlight through

the thin white blouse she

holds up folds and puts away

splitting wood

dry leaves

crackle in the rain

grey river

understanding

the rain

The exercise successfully got us in the spirit and brought forth a lively discussion, including the limits of anthropomorphism.

After coffee and with the sun shining after weeks of rain we gathered outside for Stuart's informative introduction to the life and works of HOSAI OZAKI.   He read from 'Right Under the Big Sky I don't wear a Hat' written by this disillusioned insurance company executive.   Born in 1895, always very perceptive and attuned to nature, Hosai resorted to heavy drinking before leaving his work and travelling to various monastic centres, living all the while in extreme simplicity and poverty.   To his dismay he found there the same corruption and internal politics he had hoped to escape from.  The main theme of his writing, in a plain, unembellished style (almost like diary jottings) and sometimes containing melancholic humour, is the loneliness of humankind.   Stuart read a selection including:

I cough and I'm still alone

In the darkness of a well I find my face

I open the dark drawer with nothing in it just to see

The nails in the nailbox are all crooked

Remembering a place I hate I kick a puddle

OZAKI spent the last year of his life as caretaker of a Buddhist temple on the small island of Shodo.   Suffering extreme ill health, he died there aged 31.

Our discussion took up the themes of failure and disillusion.  'We've all been there,'  said Ken;  the ducks laughed in agreement.   The value of failing and the aliveness of stones took us into our next session:

A presentation by Kim of a paper on 'ZOKA' by Don Baird.  Kim himself found the paper not well written but the ideas represented a useful summary of the conditions necessary for the writing of haiku.   The group came up with synonyms for 'Zoka':   'relaxed readiness'   and 'receptivity' - to respond to the vitality of nature and the whole cycle of becoming and unbecoming .....  the comings and goings of everything.   We flowed into the spirit with the concepts of transience, impermanence, the lightness and ordinariness of things .... nothing happening/everything happening ....  in surrendering ourselves, becoming ourselves.   And by allowing ourselves that unique place of non-thought, so creating the conditions for a 'haiku moment':  an internal environment 'aligned to the spirit of Zoka' :

our chatter

inside a universe

of birdsong   (Jonathan Buckley)

as if it were

observing the view

a plastic chair

The OUTING on Saturday afternoon for most of us was a 2-car trip to the beach at TONFANU where the river rushes to the sea.   Meeting up some 2 hours later, we walked on wet sand, gazed in rock pools and out to sea, sat on generous pillow-like boulders, slept, reflected, attempted to get into that Zoka spirit!

in         grains       rhythm     his

    sand           the             of       stride (Jane Spray)

failing light

slack waves

on a falling tide

near the bench

where someone loved this spot

gulls circle                                    (Meg)

Sunny day

when the tide is out

the emptiness                              (Jonathan)

Ken and Jim meanwhile headed to the hills, returning with biscuits (!) and tales of a deserted house, indoor plants ceiling high at the windows where, peeping through, a fully decorated Christmas tree.

back in a while

house plants crowd the windows

the car fills with weeds              (Jim)

The evening, as again on Sunday evening, was spent reviewing our various haiku written anonymously on sheets pinned to the wall.   This sensitive procedure was conducted expertly and generously as always by George.  Those we each preferred are offered throughout and at the end of this report.

While most of us then slipped off to bed, the hard core continued over red wine around the AGA.

SUNDAY morning and the first, a rich, lively session was chaired by Kim and focussed on Meg's questioning:  In HAIKU PROSE  which comes first:  the haiku or the prose?  AND ... does the haiku amplify the preceding prose or take it forward in some way?

Jim presented a further possibility:   the HAIKU SEQUENCE, reading an example 'Sparks from a Charnel Ground' from his recently published 'The Fragrance of Dust'.   Stark memorable images.   It was generally agreed that a sequence, perhaps with title, can stand alone.

It was suggested that the prose may act as 'architecture around the momentary perceptions of the haiku';  in which case only a minimal amount of prose may be needed to hold things together.

Starting with prose, there is a risk of the stereotypical paragraph followed by a haiku, back to prose then a haiku etc.  A format which can lack 'spark'.   However, it is a form used effectively as  travelogue, combining perhaps history and geography then momentary perceptions.

Reference was made to Clare McCotter's  'Poetic Haibun' where the haiku come 'from a different parallel universe'.   George spoke of his experiments in this vein:  'lateral haiku' with prose telling the story followed by haiku acting as a 'Greek chorus'.   Also his poignant 'prison haibun';  'Man into Air':  a background story of a lifer dying from cancer, interspersed with 'parallel haiku' of the sea, the tide, the fog.

Ken spoke of the concept 'link and shift' where the (often poetic) prose is interspersed with haiku which move to 'a different country'.   In this way the haiku reflect the prose AND move it on.   References were made to Register and to Music.  I found helpful the image of the density of the narrative then the sense of 'a little photo'  or 'a clearing in the forest' ......  a series of stepping stones ..... an island of simplicity.

The place of an opening haiku:  may be more powerful than the more traditional final haiku.

So, in conclusion, the message was:   start with either (prose or haiku), remembering that the prose may be the more 'poetic'.

Above all experiment!

AND make use and share experimentation and comment on the interactive website:

 <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Haikuprose/>

In the warmth of the sun we then took our chairs outside for a  LANDSCAPE MEDITATION  led by Ken.   Choosing a spot on the high ground near the  'standing stone', we meditated in 5 stages:  on the foreground, the middle distance, the background (slightly mysterious distance), the great sky and finally the WHOLE.   A heavenly experience, gazing at the mighty Bird Rock and surrounding hills, drifting clouds in a blue sky.   The wonder of it all.

imagining beyond

the far trees

the sea                 (Kim)

in the still pond

clouds disperse and form

an immense sky               (Meg)

sea mist

floods the valley

an ancient sadness         (Ken)

solitary pine

battered by years

of haiku

From the stillness we then entered 'THE GREAT DEBATE'.   Again Kim in the Chair, the debate aimed to amplify a dialogue between Ken and Jim regarding the use of dream and imagination in haiku prose.  It originated in Ken's phantasy/fairy story recounted in the form of haiku prose.   As I understand it, Ken supported the use of imagination/dream/phantasy, believing that we all share a reality beyond 'reality' e.g. in recounting a dream.   He made reference to Dogen, that ALL is experience, 'what dreamed and what touched'.   Jim was questioning the difference between imagination and the imaginary and if one employs one's own imagination, what place this leaves for the reader.

The afternoon free, different groups chose to walk, prepare food, relax in the garden, visit the church in Tywyn, have tea in Aberdovey.

soft clatter

of a bumble bee

inside a foxglove

noon

my builder's tea

the bitter leaf

the emollient milk     (George)

In the evening our final discussion of individual haiku - this time with a difference:   each of us was restricted to writing up on the wall just 2 chosen haiku.   The limit worked well, giving more time to individual contributions.  From those, each of us chose 2 of our own haiku from the weekend (or indeed previously) to appear in this report.

These self-selected haiku appear (acknowledged by name) throughout the text or below:

travelling alarm

the time lights up

and fades             (Ken)

running in this trough

the clarity

of rainwater          (Kim)

we sit in a circle

for the photograph

it comes out blurred    (Jane W)

Rodin's 'Thinker'

sits and thinks, staring

at blue hydrangeas     (Jane W)

like husband and wife old shoes   (Stuart)

in a fall of bright hair autumn rain   (Stuart)

in the hollow of the field

an early mist

holding autumn            (Heather)

I kneel down and

put my arms around

the mountain                (Heather)

beginningless kalpas of time perhaps

to the Big Bang

of this ripe nectarine                        (George)

the last curlew's call

still in mind

I dream the withered baby               (George)

Another weekend of friendship, meditation, reflection, laughter and excellent food, sharing the delights of the natural world and our attempts to capture the moment.

within the span of a footstep

all that I seek                         (Jim)

Meg Griffiths

October 2012