**Haiku Sangha 2014**

*“Wanting what is not, and not wanting what is: this is the trouble,” – Ken Jones.*

The traditional silence of our first breakfast was broken by George Marsh, who announced: “You may talk now – not that it’ll do you any good.” And so the haiku sangha of 2014 was underway.

**One Liners**

Stuart Quine shared his ‘manifesto’ on his trademark form, the one-line haiku. We discussed some examples:

a dusting of snow light on the apple skins

*-John Barlow*

the going in her coming the rain before it falls

*-Jim Kacian*

fell wind from the hawthorn tips a little rain

*-Stuart Quine*

Stuart justified his preference for one-liners by reminding us that Japanese haiku were never originally divided up into three lines, since they are expressed in Japanese characters in one vertical strip. Are the three line breaks in Western haiku arbitrary? Certainly the strict 5-7-5 syllable count seems to have now been dropped. However, Ken Jones suggested that there may be a rationale behind the three-line structure, since it gives pause before the last, contrasting image. Perhaps this helps the ‘leap’ from the first to the second image that provides the ‘aha!’ moment that successful haiku impart. Kim Richardson had the revelation that with some haiku, a feeling of openness was actually contained within the image – with other haiku, the openness occurred outside of the image.

Despite Stuart’s efforts to prevent it, we discussed whether each one-liner ‘could’ benefit from being a two or three-liner, or whether they were inherently more effective being read in one continuous line. I think that most of us agreed that some, if not all, did justify the continuity, and I think that most of us felt a new appreciation of this form, which was reflected in the number of one-liners that appeared on the wall each evening.

rain on a tin roof yesterday yields to today

*-Stuart Quine*

weary of haiku I rearrange the spice jars

*-Stuart Quine*

drawn on this silent night velvet curtains

*-Heather Dyer*

amid all this moonlit splendour I return to darkness

*-Stuart Quine*

so light in my hand this empty crab shell

*-Kim Richardson*

sunrise overwhelmed by birdsong

*-Jane Whittle*

patterns in the sand memories of waves

*-Jane Whittle*

crystal windchimes the sound of rainbows

*-Kim Richardson*

**Nounless Haiku**

George Marsh introduced the idea that naming things effectively ‘puts them in a box’ and separates them from their true essence and therefore our true experience of them. He shared his experiments with writing ‘nounless haiku’. His examples included:

*scurrying after the thrown*

*wholly intent*

*on whatever bounces away*

*squirms
rising and nosing, left and right
before each wriggled stretch*

and one-noun haiku included:

*my last week’s cut healed –
just feeling touch-hard
enough*

There was some debate over what constituted a noun – since abstract nouns, pronouns and a ‘toolbox of lubricating suffixes’ were perhaps used as substitutes for proper nouns. Some of our experiments included:

blown hither and thither how playfully
she thinks she feels

*-Ken Jones*

still
sitting uncomfortably
fidgeting still

*-Jonathon Buckley*

airy transparent quivering
craggy-cracky holding
slaty shafting grounding

*-Jane Spray*

yes flowering in her no

*-Stuart Quine*

These haiku, as Meg Griffiths pointed out, challenge the idea of what we have always believed haiku to be. But could reading a lot of nounless haiku allow an experience of ‘process’ that frees the reader from the ten thousand things? Do haiku containing only verbs and adjectives paint an abstract picture that suggests a concrete image? And likewise, do haiku containing nouns use concrete images to impart the abstract suchness of things? Perhaps transmission between the concrete and abstract is valid both ways? Interestingly, Jane Whittle pointed out that nouns are the first words we forget when we get older.

George challenged us to go outside and find a tree and write a nounless haiku that conveyed its ‘treeness’.

upsucking towards – urgh! – aah!

*-Heather Dyer*

from underneath a surging upwards

*-Jane Whittle*

Lunch was a sublime mushroom soup with huge dumplings swimming in it. Afterwards, three parties drove down to the beach. Unfortunately, Jane Spray had a puncture down a narrow lane, but Kim and Jonathan from the car behind were able to come to the rescue and change the wheel. It was a bright, windy day, and on the beach the waves seemed playful and energetic.

encrusted rock slow dance of lichens

*-Jane Spray*

I sit with fog
off the ocean incense scented
no centre

*-George Marsh*

fractals in the sand
the ebbing tide
knows how

*-George Marsh*

Later that night there would be a storm with a downpour that managed to find its way into George’s room and meant he had to dry his clothes over the aga the next morning!

my damp clothes
when it rains hard at night
this mountain overflows

*-Jonathan Buckley*

**~~Hygiene~~ Haijin: The Poet from Hell**

Ken asked the group to share our feelings on how each of us came to haiku, and what we feel the future of haiku is. He shared some striking examples of haiku by Nagata Koi that evoked suchness:

a winter crow
steps forward
the scene steps too

rows of earth
left alone to play
in the moonlight

autumn rain
emptiness of the empty glass
overflowing, overflowing

The speaking stone was passed. Ken suggested that haiku that impart the ‘suchness of things ’and allow us to ‘contemplate human existence and feel life more deeply’ are in decline, and that perhaps the spiritually liberative nature of haiku is being overlooked. Are the young interested in haiku or in experiencing the suchness of things? As the youngest of the group I had to concede that I don’t know anyone else my age who is interested in haiku – but then, I don’t know many people who are interested in experiencing ‘suchness’, either. And perhaps it was always thus and will always be.

With any movement, do a few individuals pave the way, and when the rest follow does the purity of intent get muddied – before being re-established as though for the first time? Jane Spray first came to an awareness of haiku via the Zen books that her mother kept in the house when she was a child. Jane Whittle pointed out that there are other routes to suchness, too – and certainly I feel that the young in general are more curious than ever about spirituality without dogma, meditation and mindfulness, and other Eastern practices. This makes me hopeful. Meg quoted from TS Elliot: “What might have been and what has been points to one end: which is always present.”

The conversation led to creativity, and the fact that haiku ‘find you’ rather than the other way around. Ken reminded us that playfulness is conducive to creativity. Kim quoted EM Forster in that ‘it’s only things seen sideways that sink in’ and we talked about the struggle many of us had in finding space and solitude in our daily lives in order to experience the glimpses of suchness and creativity that are so enriching.

On Sunday afternoon Jane led several people up Bird Rock, a very steep rocky outcrop that seems to have come away from the main mountain. The valley floor is flat and fertile and the sea once reached this far inland. Cormorants who are descended from those who nested on the cliffs of Bird Rock when the sea would have crashed at the foot of the cliffs, nest here still. Now, says Jane, it’s quite a spectacle to watch the chicks launch from their nests and take flight just before hitting solid ground. From the top of the rock we looked out across this lovely valley, which has a sense of being sheltered from the rest of the world, with Cadair Idris looming over it at one end, and the sea beckoning from the other.

 delight in arriving
 breathing faster
climbing higher slow
des
cend
ing

*-Meg Griffiths*

old as the hills that curve into these creaking knees

*-Jonathan Buckley*

Then we gathered round the table again to devour an appetizer of mozzarella with Jane Spray’s homegrown tomatoes, basil and a balsamic dressing. As ever, George managed to delight us all at every mealtime and somehow keep up with the sessions as well as lead the evening haiku critiques.

**Workshopping Haiku**

This year, there was a limit of two haiku per person for ‘the wall’:

in the room we shared
the empty bed occupied –
the ghost of a future guest

*-Heather Dyer*

can it be nineteen years
since I met the moon
in the duck pond?

*-Jane Whittle*

I call them pretty
fooled by their shapeliness
clouds in the sunlight

*-George Marsh*

always roaring
the echo in me
of the wind between the stars

*-George Marsh*

a grey dawning
one candle lighting
these veined hands

*-Meg Griffiths*

Ken said, ‘It’s a pleasant fellowship we have here.” Indeed it is. Discussions ranged from consciousness, creativity, the future of haiku, the abstract versus the concrete, choosing a meditation technique to suit you, love and marriage, aging as the most valuable field of practice, the structure of the universe, fractals, ghosts and exit strategies. Despite the seriousness of our discussions there was also much laughter.

What a treat it is to step away from routine and immerse oneself in nature, in haiku, in the big questions, and in each other. For me, there’s something about these weekends that reminds me that we are *all* connected at a deeper level. I am reminded that ‘wanting what is not, and not wanting what is,’ is the real problem, and although I may never achieve a sustained acceptance of ‘what is’, these weekends allow me to briefly ’cleanse the windows of perception’ and glimpse the suchness of things –which is our true home.

stopping to rest
the cows and the sheep
stop too

*-Jonathan Buckley*