



The Moment of Awe

Garry Gay talks with Udo Wenzel

Udo Wenzel: In the haiku community your name is cited foremost in connection with the West-Eastern form of semiotic or linked poetry, the "rengay", invented by you and named after you. What affected you to invent this kind of collaborative poetry, and how did you find the name?

Garry Gay: Yes, I had been exploring alternatives to the longer renku / renga. I was seeking a more intimate and thematic form. I knew I wanted a form that was able to stay in the moment much like a haiku does yet have more depth than a haiku does because of the perspective of two (or three) writers on the same theme. After playing around with different lengths and different combinations on two and three verse patterns, I felt the current pattern to be the most workable in my mind. I felt there was a real need for a thematic linking form. Something much shorter than the standard 36 link renku. Also the renku, by its very nature is written through all four seasons. I wanted to stay in one place in time, like a haiku does. The renku is also much more of a game in the way it is written, with moons and flowers in certain places. I wanted a less confusing form. A form with far less rules.

Seldom did I see renku or renga's published in the journals. It usually takes four pages to reproduce one. But a rengay fits nicely on one page.

Obviously the name rengay was a word play on renga and my last name. All I did was hang a “y” on the end. But rengay are not renga or renku. And it was not meant to be.

They are two completely different forms. You could even say one is an Eastern linking form and one is a Western linking form. But the rengay is very dependent on ones ability to understand and write haiku. To write a good rengay you are probably a good haiku writer as well. The rengay like the haiku rely on your ability at suggestive writing.

Udo Wenzel: Why did you develop a new kind of linked poetry, why didn't you simply experiment with haiku sequences of different kind and length?

Garry Gay: A good question. A haiku sequence by its very nature is a solo form written by one poet or author. Although the haiku poems are strung together, maybe even flowing down one linked back to the other, they follow a downward pattern. Several big differences here. With two (or three) poets, you can have completely different perspectives on the same theme, this is very hard to do with just one poet. (Although you will note, there are solo rengay's being written). This is sort of like having an accident were witnesses see the same scene in different ways. Reporting how they see it. Also the poets are not just writing in a link back type of way, they are linking to a theme (and maybe more then one theme). Often the last verse of a rengay will link back to the first verse or beginning verse. Again as I stated above the length was decided upon partly as how it would reproduce nicely on a single page.

Udo Wenzel: An important characteristic of the rengay is the restriction on one theme. Which topics are chosen frequently, and what kind of themes are appropriate too?

Garry Gay: Yes the rengay is a very thematic poem. In fact I would say if the rengay wonders to far off the topic, it will fail as a poem. There can be more then one theme in a rengay. I have written a number of two and three themes in a rengay. Its ok if the

second or third themes are very subtle. Let the reader discover the subtle second theme. There is no restriction on theme. The world is your stage, explore it.

Udo Wenzel: What's about the evolution of the rengay? Did it grow up already? Are you content with it?

Garry Gay: I believe the rengay is grown up in the sense that it has matured and been excepted world wide as a standard type of poetic form. A fixed format. Still there is an evolution in the way poets are using the form. There has been a lot of experimentation. We poets are artists too. We like to try new things, see how they work, see how they fit into our vision of the world. One thing that the rengay has done, is that it has opened the gate to the idea that you can break the rules, try something different. Examples within the rengay are, fork rengay, 3-forked rengay, star-rengay, mystery-rengay and more. I am pleased to see the poets have a form they feel allows them to be creative. rengay are being written in numerous languages.

Udo Wenzel: What are the most important things for writing a rengay? Are there any traps to fall into? For example, writing with too much or less closeness, writing too narrative, too monotonous or too arbitrary?

Garry Gay: Writing a rengay should be fun. There are purposely few rules. Stay within the set format, keep the verses haiku verses, stay within your theme. Give your poem a title. I would really say there are no traps.

You're really asking for guidance on the structure of linking. In a renga, your always going forward through the four seasons, or at least always going downward. In a rengay, you're more concerned with staying within the central theme. I say central theme, because there can be more than one. But one theme will be seen more dominate. So you can link and shift away from each verse, but always staying within theme. You do not have to always link back to the verse before yours, as long as you touch on the theme. In other words, you could link to the first starting verse, or link back to the verse before yours or just link to the central theme. If you shift to far away

from the theme, your poem will be less effective. It will fall apart. Can the verses be too close to one another? Here is where your partnership comes into play. I will give you no rules for this. You need to be creative partners and discuss your poem and verses together. Does this work or that work? It's your collaboration that makes the renga what it is. Yes they could be too close together or too far apart. There is no rule for this, it is esthetics. I would not say that you can write them in a too narrative way, but telling a story poetically. It's somewhat like writing a haiku sequence, except in a sequence you are usually always going downward. But in a renga you can link back or even just to the theme. The time frame can move around a little more than a sequence. If a renga looks too arbitrary, I would say it's too weak, close to failure.

Udo Wenzel: Outside the haiku world you have a reputation as a professional photographer. Are there (inter)connections between both art forms? How do you link photography to short poetry, and how could they be linked ideally?

Garry Gay: Both photography and haiku poetry have a number of similar qualities. They are both in the moment type of art forms. They really focus on the here and now. They are both very visual art forms. These two art forms are closer to reality than they are to fantasy or fiction. They can be very effective when put together. One can complement the other. One can illustrate the other, both can stand alone. I am both a commercial photographer and a fine art photographer. I have an online book created by Randy Brook, of Brooks Books. It is called *The Long Way Home*. It pairs my photography with my haiku. You can see it at:

<http://www.brooksbookshaiku.com/ggayweb/index.html>

You can also view my web site at: www.photogarry.com

Udo Wenzel: How important is the photo's high quality within the combination of photo and haiku? Do you enjoy the digitalisation of the photography?

Garry Gay: As a professional photographer I am of course very concerned that every photo is of the highest quality. At least to me personally. There are a number of ways that the combination of photo and haiku can work together. One is that the photo just sets the mood for the haiku, not illustrate it. Another is that the haiku does not need to describe what is in the photo, but captures the spirit of the image. I love the digitalization of photography. In many ways it has allowed me to be more creative. The future of photography is going to be all digital.

Udo Wenzel: How important is realism in your artwork?

Garry Gay: I think to a degree it is very important. For the most part, the content of the poem and the inspiration for the poem is very real. Like any poet I will take liberties in regard to word choices, and rearrange some minor events in a poem to make it more effective. The message to me is the most important part of the poem. Staying true to the spirit of the experience. As a poet I use recall of childhood memories as a source of inspiration. Here the realism is mixed with fragments of what I remember and how I feel about those memories.

Udo Wenzel: Who influenced you as a haiku-poet, and who as a photographer?

Garry Gay: I have been influenced by many different artists. As a poet, I have enjoyed studying the Japanese masters, Basho, Buson, Issa and certainly Shiki. In photography, I have been inspired by Ansel Adams and Edward Weston as well as Irving Penn.

Udo Wenzel: How relevant is the so-called traditional Japanese haiku for the modern haiku, and what are the relations of your own poetry to the traditional roots?

Garry Gay: As for how relevant the traditional Japanese haiku is to the modern haiku, I do think it is still very relevant. We all still adhere to the spirit of the traditional haiku no matter what language we speak. As a modern haiku writer, I seldom follow

the traditional syllable count. I prefer a shorter length haiku. An almost breath length haiku. For me personally, the seventeen syllable count haiku is too long.

Udo Wenzel: What are the essentials of haiku? When does poetry fail to be a haiku, or the opposite way, when does a haiku become poetry?

Garry Gay: The essentials of haiku for me is the spirit of the poem. The beauty of the captured moment. There are important elements which really make a haiku for me. I like to see some sort of tension in the poem. Also surprise and contrast can make for a successful haiku. Some element of juxtaposition really holds a poem together for me. Although I do feel kigo, or season word is important, I don't think its needed in every poem. Haiku fail when they read like a telegram. Or there is poor structure to the poem, like a word hanging off the end of a sentence, which should really be moved to the next line. Or the whole poem that just becomes one long sentence. If the haiku just seems like a picture poem, I feel it is just a so so poem. A haiku becomes poetry when it touches you. When you have that moment of awe. There should be a little magic to the poem, a feeling of discovery.

Udo Wenzel: The development of the world wide web has been a great leap forward for the spread of haiku. I suppose that never before so many haiku have been written and published all over the world as on the internet. What are the results for haiku poetry and what are the consequences to you personally?

Garry Gay: The world wide web has certainly had the ability to spread the word about haiku. It may certainly be the single most reason that renga has grown so rapidly. That our work can be shared so quickly. Can be talked about in different countries and cultures and languages. It's a real phenomena. In the history of man, we have never been able to communicate with so many people in so many different places all at once. There is of course a down side for those of us who love the haiku. It has just as rapidly spread bad work or poorly written haiku. Just look at the spam haiku for instance. We also have many more opportunities to educate. Hopefully we

can teach the difference between the poorly written haiku and the great haiku. As for me personally, it has helped me reach a wider audience.

Udo Wenzel: There is a discrepancy between the brevity of haiku and the vast quantity of articles about. How would you explain this, and how do you feel about this development?

Garry Gay: I see no problem with this. Scholars love to explore the nuances of a literary genre. In some cases it is just papers and articles on teaching the form to others. For as simple as the haiku appear, we know they are harder to write than one might think. I think people are always seeking to explain the haiku.

Udo Wenzel: Is the acceptance of modern haiku poetry as a serious literary genre in the West of interest to you, or not at all? What are the requirements for haiku to be noticed also by scholars of literature, and to become a subject to literary criticism?

Garry Gay: Yes, the acceptance of haiku poetry is very very important to me. I have spent the last thirty years reading, writing, studying and promoting the haiku form. I have founded a haiku society, the Haiku Poets of Northern California, founded the Haiku North America conference helped create and co-founded the American Haiku Archives in Sacramento, California. The requirements for haiku to be noticed outside our own community is simply to create great work. There is more and more recognition for the haiku form than when I started writing them thirty years ago. Literary criticism is also very important. We can't be afraid to voice our opinions and challenge poorly written haiku. We really need more critics. The haiku for me personally, is equal to every other type of traditional and modern poetry.

Udo Wenzel: Would you please present us some of your haiku?

Garry Gay: Here is some of my haiku:

Autumn begins
leaves follow me
into the shed

Snowflakes's fall
into the darkness
of the tuba

Floating
in the dishwater
a pair of chopsticks

To cheat
the echo ...
we whisper

Along the way
an old oak branch
becomes a walking stick

Hole in the ozone
my bald spot ...
sunburned

Reflected
in the sword's blade
soft summer clouds

The trail forks ...
taking the one
with wildflowers

Weight lifter

slowly lifting

the tea cup

Along the trail

trading one walking stick

for another

Used book store;

the cat moves quietly

among dead authors

Family reunion –

again explaining

what a haiku is

Cherie Hunter Day and Garry Gay

Snapshot

cropped photograph –

leaving my shadow

on the darkroom floor

from the bottom of the tray

your smile slowly develops

pulling me closer

in front of the camera ...

first date

pinned
on the bulletin board
your snapshot

a roll of negatives ...
the brightness of your dark eyes

self timer
I join you
in the photograph

Photo-Haiku



Moving day
cherry blossoms fall
into unpacked boxes



Early morning
fishermen tell stories
waiting for the tide

Garry Gay: Here is the link to my online haiku book
The Long Way home.

<http://www.brooksbookshaiku.com/ggayweb/index.html>

Udo Wenzel: Thank you very much for the interview!