



How it becomes: Against an essentialist view of haiku

by **Udo Wenzel**

The boy winds up his matchbox-car and lets it speed over the square. Doves lift off in all directions. The sound of their wings dies away in the niches of the city. A shadow on the wall drops deep behind it. What is haiku? A question with differing “definitive” answers. But does an *is* exist at all? One nature, one essence of haiku? Haven't all attempts to establish definitions failed due to the inherent variety of the form? The haiku genre is what poets, readers and critics have made and continue to make of it. It remains unfinished, as every single new haiku “produces” the genre haiku. Whatever you think about, haiku is what has been made of it. A twisted trunk grew from historical roots, its petals wafted by eastern winds throughout the world, its offspring grafted with other species, and the genre thus has been recreated again and again. It's necessary to recognize that syllable and *kigo* rules, touted as “traditions,” are inventions of the modern: games of power. The moon above us is not the same moon as that viewed by a Japanese poet during an historical autumnal moon viewing.

John A. Wheeler once told us the moon does not exist when no one is viewing it. I understand this not as a scientific but rather a constructivist statement; it is our specifically human—physiological, cultural, and individual—filters which are crucial to its creation. In this sense, the moon does not exist without us. Each culture creates the world in its own endemic way, but a “pure culture” cannot exist. Nevertheless, we find a plethora of helpless efforts resisting the ever-occurring exchange of cultures, resisting cultural

permeability. *World* is open; but not arbitrary. Daily we create it new or verify it. With every haiku, with every poem we create order, a sense of beauty of the vicissitudes and randomness inherent in it.

Don't let us determine pro or con thematics, pro or con nature, pro or con the human, pro or con the seasons, or what phenomena are seemingly essential for them. We do not describe the world as it *is*, but rather as we see and experience and invent it via writing, as it becomes, as it changes, via our successful works. With our powers of observation, imagination and expression we are able to create verbal imagery of extreme brevity and concentration, to the horizon and sometimes beyond.

Haiku language is tied to the world and life, and without this material it cannot exist. The tension between language and reality delivers power and sound to the haiku. There is no wordless poetry. Let us shake out the pompous talk of silence, depth and haiku "essence" from our verbiage and move rather towards an awareness of the weight of weightlessness of poetic language. Let us depart from all that is pretentious and overly ostensible. Let's try to be light ambiguously, diffusively precise. Is there a way back to the lightness of the late Bashô? Is it possible to reinvent *karumi* for our world? Perhaps it is already to hand—if we drop the pretensions we'll be free to grab it: a lightness, weighted only by the necessity to find the implicate, constantly changing order of poetic language, and by our responsibility to what we are creating.

With luck we may visualize the *Geheimnißzustand* (Novalis' state of mystery) of small and common things, their poetry—neither hidden within nor unconcealed—hovering as potentiality between us human beings, our language and the things around us.

full moon –
a matchbox car
reverses

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