
REVIEWS

Spring Clouds, by Bruce Ross (Bangor, Maine: Tancho Press, 2012). 150 unnumbered pages; 5½"×8½". Glossy white card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-983714-11-8. Price: \$14.95 from the author at Tancho Press, 499 Broadway, Suite 127, Bangor ME 04401.

Reviewed by Tom Painting

The newest book by haiku poet Bruce Ross, *Spring Clouds*, is very much of a man born, raised, and residing in northern climes. Ross spent his early life shuttling between Ontario and western New York State. A child of the '40s and '50s, Ross recalls car rides across farmlands and through small towns. "I watched this landscape in a dreamy state, mile after mile, and was elevated by it."

Eventually, Ross relocated to Hampden, Maine, where he now resides. "Where you breathe is where you are," exclaims Ross. Throughout his life Ross has breathed the air of the outdoors. Natural settings such as parks and wild places inform Ross's haiku poetry.

I found myself a bit baffled by the preface to *Spring Clouds*. Ross's statements seem somewhat disjointed. I came away with the impression that the poet is not so much writing what he knows, but is writing to explore his own evolving definition of haiku. Toward the end of his musings, Ross offers, "haiku [is] a poetry that can connect our feeling to nature and to a deeper nature." At this point his intention becomes clear and acts as a springboard to the classic haiku in this volume.

Ross is at his best with haiku that utilize the pronoun "my." The poet's presence in the poem strengthens the connection to his surroundings while bringing the reader into his personal thoughts:

hidden cabin
the lake so quiet
my mind settles

the thunderstorm
lifts off the highest peak
my lingering dreams

a gray strand
of my wife's hair
spring morning

in my old cup
these weathered cracks
winter dawn

There is an intimacy in these poems that is lacking in a number of others in which the author is directly telling the reader what he thinks or feels. For example:

my emptiness
a dark cloud covers
the harvest moon

I listen more
and become them too
small lake waves

the crow
doesn't know what it wants
but it's interested

Many of Ross's haiku fall into the category of "plain-sense writing" as described by Charles Trumbull in his essay "Meaning in Haiku." Ross composes a good number of haiku that are attentive, straightforward descriptions:

old family plot
the rusted gate closed
with a rusted wire

a sudden tinkling
of the wind bell
winter stars

There are no fewer than four haiku in the collection that either begin or end with the phrase, "this/the heat," which I find disconcerting. Four of the haiku conclude with the words "this sadness," which directs the reader to a foregone conclusion, thus diminishing the element of surprise.

for the rice
an old wooden spoon
this sadness

a shore rock
leans on a larger rock
this sadness

A leaner, more selective volume may have better served Ross. Nevertheless, of the 132 haiku that appear in *Spring Clouds* a fair majority are well crafted and offer insight into Ross and the things he values. I would recommend this book to all who are not familiar with Bruce Ross, a poet who has devoted himself to the craft and promotion of English-language haiku.

Before Music: Haiku, by Philip Rowland (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2012). 70 unnumbered pages; 4¼"×6½". Glossy indigo card covers. ISBN 978-1-936848-19-5. Price: \$12.00 + s&h from the publisher at www.redmoonpress.com.

Reviewed by David Grayson

Philip Rowland's haiku have been described as surrealist and avant-garde. Indeed, much of the poetry in *Before Music*, Rowland's new collection, fits into both of these traditions.

bright autumn noon—
a sudden chorus of birds from inside
a briefcase

This haiku starts off as we'd expect with a seasonal reference. The second line, too, is not out of the ordinary. It is the last word, "briefcase," that throws a curve ball and requires the reader to take (what Rowland has termed elsewhere) a "bold imaginative leap." By dropping a jarring image into an otherwise "normal" setting, Rowland sets the reader off balance.

By pulling us out of the familiar reality and upsetting the applecart of our expectations, experimental poetry unsettles us and can provoke a sense of unease. But rewards await those who can get past this initial discomfort. One benefit of experimental poetry (not just experimental haiku) is that it often uses language that we normally take for granted

and casts it into relief so that we notice it again. By removing or disfiguring the context that we expect, we experience words anew.

summer rain
the old woman's shins
transparent

Although not as disjunctive as the “briefcase” haiku, the pattern is identical. The first two lines are conventional. It is the single word “transparent” that surprises the reader. In everyday speech, “transparent” is used in all sorts of practical ways. In this haiku, it’s used to convey an experience of old age. This poem imagines the lightness of the old woman’s body. The word “transparent” is kin to “invisible,” implying that the old woman’s physical body is winnowing down and fading—as if preparing for the passing from this world.

As these two examples reveal, Rowland’s haiku prompt the reader to viscerally react to a striking image—even before reaching for comprehension.

night drawing in
a mask in the teeth
of the escalator

I’d wager that the image of “a mask in the teeth” is the first thing that a reader will react to and is what he or she will remember most. Indeed, I would argue that in this haiku, the image is actually more important than the meaning. Does it matter how a reader understands this scene? It could allude to something fun: a mask lost amid a night of revelry. Or something more menacing, as “teeth” and “drawing in” imply. Or, it could simply refer to a mundanity—nothing more than a dropped mask. What is memorable is the image itself.

It’s important to remember that “experimental” or “avant-garde” work should not solely be equated with flights of fancy. Rowland’s poems are firmly grounded in the senses, particularly sight and sound.

dusk rearranging silences

As the book title foreshadows, several poems carry the theme of sound: hearing and listening, music and words, and silence. As with the “dusk” haiku, sound and silence both invite a sensation of space. There is much left unsaid—for the reader to fill in or “rearrange.”

Some kinds of experimental poetry do pose risks for the author, whether it’s sounding too didactic or too conceptual. For example, a criticism of Language poetry was that it was more interesting to read about Language poetry than to actually read Language poetry. Of Rowland’s forty-nine haiku, I counted only two that, to my taste, fell into this trap.

having forgotten to press
the elevator button
my life becomes interesting

This haiku captures an intriguing moment. But it lacks the crisp language and imagery of the other poems in the collection. It’s too explicit and declarative. There is less mystery and nowhere to go after the first reading.

It’s important to note that a significant number of the haiku in *Before Music* would be considered “mainstream” by most American haiku readers.

prelude in C —
winter sky
deep in the piano lid

In this haiku, the theme of music ushers space into the poem, and Rowland nicely associates the elements of season and music. Indeed, in contrast to some haiku where the *kigo* feels like an afterthought, this poem invigorates the *kigo* “winter sky,” calling the reader’s attention to it.

Ultimately, the ingredients of good haiku and good poetry—memorable imagery, exquisite language, and fresh insight—apply to all kinds of poetry, the avant-garde and the traditional, the unorthodox and the mainstream. Rowland’s poems possess these ingredients in great measure. The haiku in *Before Music* slow you down and release you from routine.

They demand that you see the world in a new light. The fortunate reader carries these new perspectives long after they close the book.

The Humours of Haiku, edited by David Cobb (Cullercoats, North Shields, England: Iron Press, 2012). 76 pages; 4"×6". Semigloss black and four-color card covers; flypapers; textured tinted papers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-956572-54-7. Price: £7.00 from the publisher at ironpress@blueyonder.co.uk.

Reviewed by Michael McClintock

If you want something done, ask a busy person. David Cobb is one of the most prolific of Britain's haiku poets and haibun writers, yet has managed through time, care, and diligence to bring together a welcome anthology of contemporary haiku.

For those who feel they got strummed by all the synaptic misfires that characterize so much of disjunctive poetics, as displayed in Gurga and Metz's *Haiku 21* anthology, David Cobb's *The Humours of Haiku* offers 240 poems that may help recover their equilibrium. The two books draw their material from roughly the same decade, beginning with the year 2000. As may be expected, Cobb appears to draw the majority of his selections from publications in the United Kingdom, particularly from *Blithe Spirit*, the journal of the British Haiku Society, and from stalwarts on the British scene like *Presence*, *World Haiku Review*, and the Snapshot Press *Haiku Calendar* series. That being said, poems are also drawn from *Mayfly*, *The Heron's Nest*, and other North American publications, as well as from chapbooks and individual collections. Though recent, some of the poems look to be classics. Three examples:

I tell him I'm alone
the look of horror
on the gondolier's face

Maeve O'Sullivan

brought here
to study old ruins
I stroke a cat

Colin Blundell

the hand gestures
of a lady giving directions
over the phone

Martin Lucas

Additionally, Cobb has included some very good, memorable work that makes its first appearance here. An example would be the three poems by Colin Stewart Jones, one being this gem:

days off
I see the world
through my toes

To me, this kind of material appears to easily meet Cobb's central aim, as stated in his foreword "to explore the range of emotions" in contemporary English-language haiku, and to show that this genre of poetry need not be understood or appreciated solely on its merits as a "poetry of Nature." The brief forward further makes clear that the book is not intended as a collection of humorous haiku per se. Cobb explains, "To the 'humours of haiku', as our title puts it—we use 'humours' in the broader sense of states of mind" and he assures us that this "doesn't mean you are supposed to find every haiku in this anthology funny. Far from it." Examples from the collection would include these, where the ambiguity actively encourages readings both comic and lachrymose:

the firefly in her jar—
nothing she does
makes it light up

Gary Hotham

after you leave
your space taken
by light and shade

Frank Williams

'Long May They Reign'
in the coronation mug
false teeth

Ken Jones

Senryu are a robust presence in the collection. The term “senryu,” however, appears nowhere in the book except in a footnote to the introduction, where we read:

The majority of journals and webzines from which the haiku in this anthology were culled do not follow the much too loose description, that any three-liner ‘primarily concerned with human nature’ should be regarded as a *senryu*. Those who adopt that definition will regard many of the poems in this anthology as senryu.... In the West, however, we do not distinguish between haiku and senryu masters.

Fine. Cobb’s point of view follows what has become a more-or-less common practice in the West over the past few decades. Senryu’s subject matter—human nature and behavior—have become directly absorbed into the haiku genre. More and more, only academics and the rare senryu grognard care to distinguish formally between the two genres, especially because of the absorption I mention. It is a perfectly natural process and reflects popular tastes and values evolving over time. In the West, categories in the arts have always been porous, with lots of blurring and blending, in practice and in descriptive definitions.

The volume’s poems are arranged by day of the week, eight poems per day, progressing through headings at the start of each set, given as “First Monday, First Tuesday, First Wednesday” through “Fifth Tuesday” — thirty sets in all. While this arrangement has virtually no aesthetic value, it does have the virtue of neutrality and works adequately as a mechanism for grouping poems that share a tone, scent, or one of the broad “humours” Cobb mentions in his foreword.

Overall, Cobb’s rummaging through the attic pays off with some good poems brought back to the living room for enjoyment. The new material he has added to the mix gives to the whole a sense of moving forward into new territories of subject matter that are both relevant and within the genre’s capabilities to illuminate. Once again, Iron Press, an independent and feisty publisher, makes a solid contribution to the library of contemporary haiku. Frowning frogs cannot stop the cows from drinking from the pool. As an editor, Cobb has not tried to prove what nobody doubts: haiku is an evolving literature in the West.

He lets the poetry speak for itself and has selected poems of divergent styles and points of view.

Third Australian Haiku Anthology, edited by Jacqui Murray, and Katherine Samuelowicz (Chapel Hill, Qld., Australia: Paper Wasp, 2011). 74 pages; 5¾"×8". Glossy black-and-white card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-921214-94-3. Price: Aus\$20.00 + \$4.00 s&h from ksamuelowicz@optusnet.com.au.

Evening Breeze: The Anthology from the Inaugural Janice M Bostok Award, edited by Jacqui Murray (Chapel Hill, Qld., Australia: Paper Wasp, 2012). 22 unnumbered pages; 8½"×6". Matte white covers with matte red card wrappers and appliqué title panel; saddle-stapled. ISBN 978-0-987313-12-6. Price: US\$15.00 from the editor at jacquimurray@bigpond.com.

Reviewed by Paul Miller

If the vitality of haiku in a country outside Japan is measured by its lack of cherry blossoms and temples as the subjects of its poems, then Australian haiku is very healthy. Australian haiku have always had a fiercely native flavor to them—which is as it should be, otherwise poems become little more than intellectual exercises on foreign topics.

Haiku in Australia started in the 1970s with Janice Bostok and her journal *Tweed*, but it wasn't really until the late 1980s via the Internet that a nationwide community developed and became aware of itself. Now, through the *HaikuOz* site (www.haikuo.org) Australians can keep current with any one of the seven main in-country groups and their activities.

The first anthology of Australian haiku was built online by Bostok and John Bird (whose work is oddly omitted from the current volume) in 1999; a second printed version followed in 2006. The current volume contains haiku by 70 poets. If one were to stereotype haiku in

Australia, it might be to notice that a great many of the poems seem to be the result of an observation, as from a *ginko* walk. In addition, they like specificities over generalities, which give the poems a strong sense of place:

solitary gum —
a hundred merinos
crowd each other's shade

Katherine Gallagher

the farmer calls
his kelpie home ...
flame trees darken

Sharon Dean

This is not to say that there is nothing personal in the poems. Many of the poets go beyond the well-made sketch. In Piko's poem, the word "his" seems a powerful reference to the writer.

a cloud shadow
crosses the lucerne field ...
rumours of you

Lorin Ford

another summer
the butterfly, still safe
under his steel pin

Greg Piko

Evening Breeze collects the winning poems of the inaugural Janice M Bostok Haiku Award, successor to the Jack Stamm Haiku Award. The inclusion of the 5 honorable mentions and 69 finalists makes the volume more of a memorial to Bostok than a simple record of results. This is apt considering Janice's place in Australia's haiku history. The quality of the haiku is equally fitting of a memorial. The winning poem:

evening breeze
a flag releases
its stars

André Surridge

As the strength of these volumes show, haiku is flourishing in Australia. Both are worth picking up.

OF PROLIFIC POETS

Molecular Lament (2012; 193 pages); *Torus* (2012, 45 pages); *Perlerorneq* (2013, 97 pages), all by John Martone (No place [Charleston, Ill.]: Samuddo/Ocean); 4¼"×7", no ISBNs. Inquire about price at johnmartone@gmail.com. All three of these books are also available online at Scribd, www.scribd.com/john-martone-2968/documents.

Pillars of Fire: Haibun and Haiku, by Steven Carter (Uxbridge, England: Alba Publishing, 2011). 64 pages; 5¾"×8¼". Perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-957259-21-8. Price: \$12.00 from the publisher at albapublishing.com.

Book of Dreams: Haibun, by Steven Carter (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2012). 70 pages; 4¼"×6½". Glossy blue card covers, perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-936848-15-7. Price: \$12.00 + s&h from the publisher at www.redmoonpress.com.

Dear Corlies/Dear Dorothy: Letters to My Parents: Haibun, by Steven Carter (No place: Gean Tree Press, 2013). Available as an e-book from <http://www.geantreepress.com/books> and <http://en.calameo.com>.

Reviewed by Charles Trumbull

John Martone defines the notion of “prolific poet.” We always receive a large handful of review copies of his new books for every issue of *Modern Haiku*. Although it seems sometimes that he must be writing down every thought he comes up with and it would be easy simply to sweep the stack of his books aside, the fact is that this is all very good stuff, worthy of reading and dwelling upon.

Martone’s love of nature and science is evident in all three book titles. *Molecular Lament* compiles eighteen sequences, each an examination, if you will, at the molecular level of topics as diverse as “a drought,” “lettuce & coriander,” “rowing,” and “hemoglobin” (the first five titles). Typically, Martone is most interested in the parallels between humans and the universe:

lettuce seeds
 too
 mostly
 lost

Torus is Martone's observations of and meditations upon two items, in separate sequences—"torus," the aftermath of a hurricane, and "from O.E. *segl*, obscure origins" (that's the title; he has "sail" in mind). We don't know which hurricane, but it doesn't really matter. My dictionary tells me that "torus" has a number of different meanings in mathematics, architecture, anatomy, and botany, and here we are left to puzzle over Martone's intent. The title verse does not help much:

chain saws too
 hurricane's
 torus

but several of the haiku refer to his mother and many detail the destruction of property, so the poet seems to have had ample cause to think deeply about the hurricane.

Martone loves to title his books using provocative and evocative words, often in languages other than English. *Perlerorneq* is an Inuktitut word meaning "to feel the weight of life." The book deals with the death of the poet's mother. Formally it is a bit of a departure from Martone's earlier work in that it contains passages of prose followed by, haibun-like, a series of haiku on the prescribed topic. The haiku, however, begin on the page following the prose, in a way that is analogous to Martone's well-known style of presenting his haiku vertically, e.g.,

snow
 blowing
 all day
 won't
 settle

The prose is welcome if only because it sheds light on the subject matter of the haiku, which is sometimes less than translucent.

As for the Carter books, first, it's important to understand that we are looking here at the work of Steven R. Carter, emeritus professor of English at California State University, Bakersfield, whose academic work focused on the intersection of language, literature, and science, and not to be confused with Steven D. Carter, professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Stanford University, the specialist on medieval Japanese literature and the origins of haiku.

Second, we have to be impressed, or possibly skeptical, of a poet who bursts onto the haiku scene in 2011 and a scant two years later has six books of haibun and haiku in print, on top of his thirty-some earlier books in his academic specialties.

Third, these are all books—mostly haibun—of better-than-average quality. The content is thought-provoking and the prose writing is especially fine, though the haiku tend to be on the slight side and typically too dependent, perhaps, on the prose to stand meaningfully on their own.

Despite its subtitle, *Pillars of Fire* comprises three sections: first, “Haibun,” mostly reminiscences of Carter’s life in California, Montana, and Poland. The second section, “Haiku,” is followed by a third, “Wasps (Micro-haiku),” which comprises a collection of three-word poems presented in stair-stepped fashion. I find these the most interesting of all, because they do what haiku are supposed to do: tell little and suggest much. One example:

campfire
words
embers

Book of Dreams carries the memories theme a bit further and, as we read in Carter’s “Author’s Note to the Reader,” “these are dreams of dreams—not metaphors or analogues necessarily, but road maps to that province of the unconscious which produces poems.” *Dear Corlies/ Dear Dorothy*, as the subtitle suggests, is a collection of letters to Carter’s parents (both deceased by his early teens), musings, actually, on his difficult childhood.