
REVIEWS

Laughing to Myself, by Tom Clausen (Rochester, Ny.: Free Food Press, 2013). 50 pages; 5¼”x8¼”. Glossy black and white card cover; perfectbound. No ISBN. \$12.50 from the publisher at 125 High Street, Rochester, NY 14609 or www.freefoodpress.com

Reviewed by Edward Zuk

Laughing to Myself, publisher Michael Ketchek tells us in his brief introduction, collects poems that span twenty-four years of Tom Clausen’s career. Ketchuk informs us that Clausen is a pioneer in haiku for having “openly let the reader into his life and into his heart.” An unusually high number of Clausen’s works do use the pronoun “I,” and by the time I finished reading this collection, I had a sense of the author as someone who was, on the whole, good-humoured, accepting of the world as it is (perhaps too much so), sensitive to his own faults, and understanding of others:

before sleep
laughing at myself
to myself

my mistakes —
no matter how many
coats of paint

floating in its own
little place in the rocks
a diet coke can

back home
the old truck comes to rest
in its ruts

Clausen is also a poet who feels a sympathy with country life; who is attached to his daughter, son, and wife (she is at one point “glad” she has married someone “perfect”); who prefers plain speech, though a few

phrases like “a shiver / of not being there” leap off the page; and who has moments of feeling alone but is soon called back to his life with others. In one haiku, Clausen’s reading of Sartre is interrupted by phone calls — so much for “being and nothingness.”

The larger issue raised by *Laughing at Myself* is how well haiku are suited to the creation of a poetic persona. Autobiography is difficult in haiku. If we look to the closely related senryu, we find it gravitating to the depiction of types. When that prolific poet, Anonymous, looked at a young samurai in 18th-century Japan, he saw the beginning of a stereotype:

the official’s little son —
 how fast he’s learned to open
 and close his fist

(*trans. Ueda*)

The joke is that even a baby samurai can take bribes. The reason for the depiction of types in the senryu is obvious: a type can be invoked fully in a few words. Haiku poets have overcome this limitation in several ways, often by writing longer haibun where the poet has more scope to portray himself. Individual haiku embrace *fūkyō*, a madness where the poet defines himself by standing outside of social norms, or turn to symbolism:

another year is gone —	within the grassy gate
a traveler’s hat on my head,	a firefly eats nettles —
straw sandals on my feet	that is what I am

Bashō (Ueda)

Kikaku (Ueda)

One finds evidence here of an unusual level of self-awareness.

Laughing to Myself, by contrast, is more difficult and modern. For all his use of the pronoun “I,” Clausen never defines himself as sharply as Bashō or Kikaku. Instead, we find haiku wondering how well, or even if, we can know ourselves:

reading into it
as much as I can
my life

on the phone with me:
my daughter tells me
she is on the phone

In the first poem, Clausen begins a self-analysis but remains silent about the results, and in the second the only revelation is a banality. His searches for self-definition are as cautious and filled with doubts as one would expect of a poet of our times.

I should add in closing that, in raising questions of this magnitude, Clausen becomes a poet who deserves our attention and respect.

Marching with Tulips, by David Cobb (Uxbridge, U. K.: Alba Publishing, 2013). 76 pages; 5¾"×8¼". Semigloss four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-957526-50-1. \$15.00 from www.alba-publishing.com

What Happens in Haibun: A Critical Study for use in Tandem with the Haibun Collection 'Marching With Tulips,' by David Cobb (Uxbridge, U. K.: Alba Publishing, 2013). 88 pages; 5¾"×8¼". Semigloss four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-957526-51-8. \$16.00 from www.albapublishing.com

Reviewed by George Swede

I first met David Cobb at a conference on Bashō at the School of African and Asian Studies, University of London in 1994. Then 68, he was witty, personable and very aware of the history of haiku and its current state in English. I met him again in 2010 at a haiku gathering in Ghent, Belgium and Cobb was exactly the same at the age of 84. It was as if he stood outside time, both mentally and physically. His prolific poetry and prose have remained outstanding as well. Cobb writes as if he were chatting over a beer in a pub. And, he is profoundly in touch with his surroundings which shows in his use of the local names for customs, places, flora and fauna, whether from his native Surrey, England, or from one of the many other places he has visited around the world.

Cobb has two objectives for *What Happens in Haibun*: 1) to discuss the principles of haibun composition and 2) to analyze 40 of the 43 of his haibun in *Marching with Tulips* according to criteria he favors. The first is met so well that both beginners and veterans of the form will be impressed with Cobb's knowledge and insights. In regards to the second, however, readers will question the wisdom of an author deciding to interpret his own work. Anticipating such a reaction, Cobb explains:

Frankly, because I am in my “senior salad days” and did not have the stamina to seek permissions from a host of other authors, to engage with them in extensive correspondence about why they said this that way, and that this way; and in the process risk falling out with them if I felt I had to say something about their works that they could not accept. And, anyway, wouldn't my choice of other writers' works have been made according to my own tastes and therefore infected with partiality?

I certainly empathize with wanting to save time and energy, but, despite Cobb's fears, these goals could have been realized equally well if he had selected for critical analysis a haibun collection or anthology with which he had no involvement. Then, at least, he would have been perceived as trying to be objective. Instead, his strategy results in enough “partiality” to be noticed. Here are some snippets taken from his examination of the fifteen haiku in “Mint Tea with Moses,” an eleven-page haibun dealing with his travels as an educator in the Middle East:

“The wordplay, alliteration and assonance are unmissable.”

“The next haiku is conceptual, an exuberant excursion into a boxing ring from hell.”

“The eighth haiku leads on to the double meaning gravity has in the prose, where it may be read either as (or both as) solemnity and Newtonian law.”

“So how does this very disjunct haiku relate to all that? I see it as a sort of reflex tic caused by embarrassment when one is at a loss for what to do.”

Such instruction can chain readers to the author's point of view and make them doubt their own understanding. As Umberto Eco, among many others, states, "A narrator, as well as a poet, should never provide interpretation of his own work. . . . When one has a text to question, it is irrelevant to ask the author" (*The Author and his Interpreters*).

While agreeing in general with Eco, I think he goes too far in dismissing the author as irrelevant. In *What Happens in Haibun*, we at least get to know what Cobb thought he meant. Such knowledge can be useful for understanding a writer's imaginative process. What we must not do is assume that Cobb has the final say. Other critics will see things in Cobb's work that he never imagined.

Now for a look at *Marching with Tulips*. The collection is vintage Cobb, perhaps because most of its haibun have first appeared in earlier publications. Nevertheless, the new ones fit right in with the old. Many haibun are dotted with English unfamiliar to most Americans, but a pleasure to read and pronounce: chasnal belch, chicane, conkers, dolines, gobbets, gudgeon, to swank, vetch, wellies. I'll leave it to readers to enjoy the discovery of what they mean. A noticeable number of non-English words appear in context now and then to liven matters even more.

Cobb's haibun can be short (one-third of a page) or long (eleven pages). The relationship of the haiku to the prose is highly variable. A haibun may be bookended with haiku, or might have only one at the end. Then again, one might find haiku only in the middle of the prose. For instance, nine haiku in a row occur in such a manner, including the one that contains the title of this collection. Cobb's prose is as lively as the man himself. While the same can be said for most of his haiku, about 20% would have trouble standing on their own, that is, without the context of the prose. Of course, not everyone thinks that this important, including Cobb himself: "Bashō did not balk at haiku that depend on accompanying prose for explanation."

Readers of either book will be left with an indelible impression of David Cobb as a gifted, learned and endearing maverick.

Susurrus, by Anita Krumin (Toronto: Inpress, 2013). 56 pages; 5½”x8½”. Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-9881179-1-4. \$10.00 CAD/USD from the publisher at www.inpress-net.webss.com

Reviewed by Paul Miller

The work in *Susurrus* spans the period from 1988 to present, despite Krumin’s involvement with haiku since the 1970s. Perhaps not as prolific as her husband George Swede, she nonetheless has a firm grasp on haiku and senryu’s uses. The poems in the collection are ordered by publication date, the more recent poems at the back. For another poet, this would signal a slow start. That is not the case here.

Her early work is primarily senryu and is characterized by its humor. Her subjects are often domestic—which I find a nice foil for some of Swede’s own domestic writings.

sensing the heat of her passion he opens a window	methodical husband: on his list of chores, she finds her name
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Some of the humor, though, is a bit darker.

in a civilized mood
 she plays Bach on the bones
 of dead elephants

Later work is a nice mix of senryu and well-crafted haiku, and continue to address domestic issues. However she also expands her palate to other observations, some from her time in Mexico.

a ball of tortilla dough slapped hand to hand pregnant teen	lone light bulb above the taco stand shadows of a dozen faces
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It is hard not to see a hard-scramble life in these poems, and I find them a nice balance to the humorous senryu. As a volume *Susurrus* is a bit slight, forty-eight poems, so I hopefully look forward to a larger collection someday. Until then, this one is worth checking out.

World Haiku Anthology on War, Violence and Human Rights Violation, edited by Dimitar Anakiev (Templeton, Calif.: Kamesan Books, 2013). 392 pages; 5½”x8½”. Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-148413-79-94. \$26.91 from online book-sellers

Reviewed by Hiroaki Sato

This anthology of 903 haiku, by 435 poets from 48 countries, apparently is the first of its kind in scope and coverage, even as it limits its subject matter to war and violence. But because it lists all haiku without comment save simple bibliographic notes, this compilation cannot avoid the problem common to most such gleanings. Ironically, the grave topics chosen for the compendium may make the matter worse. Take the following haiku by Pamela Miller Ness:

atop the rubble
our flag
at full mast

day of remembrance
a child drives his toy fire truck
in reverse

Manhattan dusk
into the ether
two vertical beams

I happen to know that Pamela Ness, like me, is a Manhattan resident, and from the publication date provided, winter/spring 2002, I assume, correctly I'm sure, that these haiku have to do with the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and its aftermath. But what about the specifics, the sentiments to be conveyed?

Yes, on the very day the towers collapsed, three firefighters raised an American flag right where they had stood, and a photo of the act was turned into a U.S. postal stamp. But didn't the photo show the flag at half mast? The U.S. flag at half mast or full mast makes a big difference, no? Did Ness want to project the kind of American triumphalism that Danny Hahlbohm did in his famous painting?

I remember fire engines from that day with remorse: I watched them blare down Seventh Avenue from the roof of my building, and then, in the elevator back down to my apartment, I wondered aloud to a neighbor: What do those fire engines hope to do? The tower is hit too high from the ground for the fire engines, isn't it? (At that point, just one of the two towers had been hit.) I learned soon enough that it was a wonderment I shouldn't have voiced.

But what is one to make of the image of a child moving a toy truck in reverse? Did it prompt the poet to wonder if the more than 300 firefighters wouldn't have had to die had they backed away?

The third haiku clearly describes the *Tribute in Light*, powerful beams thrown up straight into the sky, first in the spring of 2002, but what about the poet's sentiments? Is the choice of "ether" meant to suggest something special?

I know another person in the anthology: Višnja McMaster, from Croatia. I met her in 2005 when she came to the UN to attend the 100th anniversary of Dag Hammarskjöld's birth with Swedish Ambassador Kai Falkman. The second UN Secretary-General wrote haiku, and Falkman came to talk about the fine points of his compositions against W. H. Auden's English translations. Later McMaster sent me a CD of her haiku with idyllic photos — apparently of the area where she lives.

my teacher and I	tree trunks disappear —
silently gather chestnuts —	war sneaks deeper
the earth shakes with bombs	into our woods

Like most people, I'd read about the "ethnic cleansing" and NATO bombings of the region following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. But like

most, I didn't know the details. So, I wondered, as regards the first haiku, with what kind of "teacher" my Croatian friend was gathering chestnuts and how near the bombings were. As to the second, why were tree trunks disappearing? Were soldiers or refugees cutting down trees for fuel?

I asked the poet. Her answers: The teacher is the pan-Yugoslav haiku teacher Vladimir Devidé. No, the "bombs" are not of NATO bombers, but of artillery shells of the Yugoslav army hitting miles away. Yes, when the war started in the early 1990s, people illegally cut down trees in the public area on the mountain where she lives.

Ness and McMaster are just two poets from this giant anthology, but their haiku show that, even when the reader thinks he knows the general backgrounds of the pieces, he could miss the points—and that's not all the writer's fault. It is the fate of short poetic forms like haiku, regardless of the language in which they may be written. Still, the deficiency of the form is compounded by the editor's decision to present each or groups of haiku without context.

Even as a great many remain puzzlers, these are, of course, clear pieces. Some are startling. Here are the three haiku selected for another Croatian poet, Olga Lalić-Krowicka:

the exiled	eyes shoot
are crawling along the road	thoughts shoot
swallowing grenades	children shoot too

take me to my home
 enough with wars
 deserted yard in my eyes

With these pieces the question of ambiguity and Horatian "obscurity" inevitable to the compressed poetic form disappears.

War and violence are important but, shall we say, risky subjects for haiku. Dimitar Anakiev must be commended for daring to assemble in one volume so many haiku on these subjects with a global perspective.