
REVIEWS

The Lammas Lands, by Matthew Paul (United Kingdom: Snapshot Press, 2015). 112 pages; 5" X 7". Four-color matte card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-903543-37-5. Price: £9.99 from www.snapshotpress.co.uk

Reviewed by Caroline Gourlay

Where longer poems are concerned, it is generally assumed that poets of maturity have acquired a 'voice' and that their work can often be recognised by their style and preference for subject matter. This doesn't always apply to haiku which are usually less personal and are often associated with Zen and the seasons, thus aspiring to a more transcendental level. Nevertheless haiku poets often do develop their own particular style and Matthew Paul's voice is a quietly persuasive one. His haiku draw one in at an intimate level; each is a very personal offer, encouraging the reader to step aside from the daily round and take pleasure in the truth that his poems are presenting for us as if anticipation of our sharing and appreciation of this gift further increases his own enjoyment of it. Throughout the book there is little sign of the 'angst' that one sometimes finds in haiku; rather a feeling of pleasure and ease, acceptance with the way things are, and an awareness of the elasticity of time.

I have often wondered at the differences between American and English haiku and have come to the conclusion that one aspect of this is their differing relationship to the countryside: the English go for a walk, Americans go hiking. Such generalisations can be taken too far, but it does seem that on the whole Americans are more purposeful in their engagement with the landscape, urban or rural, than are the English, who

often seem content to ‘waste’ time in it; this latter characteristic is clearly demonstrated in some of the haiku in *The Lammas Lands*:

finding myself	mid-innings lull
staring into space —	long leg chews the fat
the shapes of graffiti	with a dog walker

Both of these are quintessentially English; not only does Matthew Paul make time to stand and stare, but he recognises and celebrates the same trait in others; in these, as in many of his poems, he achieves his effect by what at first seems to be the sheer ordinariness of his observations. Looking more closely, though, and contrary to what one might expect, the apparent aimlessness here holds an unexpected tension, particularly in the first haiku when, in the brief moment in which we let go of our thoughts, we become aware of the shapes of the graffiti—a shift that sharply concentrates the mind.

These haiku never strive to make an impact by seeking to dramatise or over-state a situation; this writer’s accuracy in identifying what it is he wants to say, pin-pointing where he needs to put the emphasis and deciding on the most appropriate words for the job, give his haiku an authenticity that convinces the reader that he/she is witnessing something of import:

slipping unnoticed	long shadows
out of the house	a wagtail undulates
last sunbeams	over the outfield

In the second haiku, where, unlike the earlier examples, movement is central to the theme, ‘undulates’ is just the right word for it describes not only the jaunty busyness of a wagtail, but also implies this particular bird’s enjoyment at having the freedom of a wide open space all to himself (enjoyment of life again). Casting back to the evening shadows then forward across the outfield, it includes and links both images, accentuating the motion that infuses and animates the haiku.

There are no hidden meanings in these poems, no clever references that require some special inside knowledge, just timelessness, an invitation to stop and look more carefully and an awareness of the way the natural world follows its own imperatives, independent and irrespective of human existence:

the holes that insects
have bored in the megalith
winter wind

One or two of the haiku failed to hold my attention—for instance

from the roof tiles
of a puddingstone church:
chaffinch song

Unless I have missed something, even with the colon, these words don't resonate sufficiently for the poem to make an impact; here the ordinariness doesn't make for anything very interesting—it neither augments one's understanding and appreciation of the way we humans experience things, nor does it make any startling observations about a fairly commonplace scene. However, merely descriptive haiku are preferable to those that are too contrived and this writer is never guilty of letting the mechanics show.

There are fewer poems here concerning people than appeared in his last book, *The Regulars*, but those that have found their way between the pages are memorable; for instance

two years old
she grasps with both hands
the autumn wind

The Lammas Lands is a delight—essential for the haiku library.