

The Haiku of Hal Roth (1931 – 2023)

Paul Miller

Hal Roth was born Harold Eugene Roth Jr. on April 13, 1931 in Northampton, Pennsylvania, to Harold Eugene Roth Sr. and Goldie Roth (Behr). He was raised in nearby Whitehall, Pennsylvania, and attended Whitehall Highschool. He enlisted in the United States Air Force at the beginning of the Korean War. After his discharge, he attended Muhlenberg College and graduated with a degree in Social Studies and Biology. He married Bonnie Newhart, a fellow native of Northampton, and moved to Glen Burnie, Maryland, to start a family and teach U.S. History. He earned a master's degree in Education from the University of Maryland.¹

Roth was employed as Coordinator of Instruction in Anne Arundel County and served as Vice Principal of Chesapeake High School. In 1972, he and his wife purchased a twenty-six-acre tree farm in Vienna, Maryland, with the goal of returning it back to woodlands. Aside from a house, the property also contained what Roth termed a “shack,” from which he did much of his later editing and writing. Personal facts are few and can only be gleaned from letters and third sources. No interview was ever performed. According to his daughter, he was a very private man.

It is unknown when Roth began writing haiku, however in a February 1981 letter to Raymond Roseliep, he remarked that he was “a recent student and writer of haiku.”² His first published haiku appeared in *Modern Haiku* 12.2 (1981):

distant crow:
mist tarries
over the marsh

He published two more later that year in Alexis Rotella's *Brussels Sprout* 2.2 (1981):

on the meadow
her worn jeans trimmed
with Queen Anne's lace

in fading light
the swirl of a trout
in the shallows

Previous to these publications, on April 22 of the same year, he had sent around a letter soliciting contributors for a new journal: *Wind Chimes*.³ Its goal, he said, was “to use the journal as an instructional tool for teaching haiku as well as a showcase for poetry.”⁴ This instructional use was most likely for himself and potential readers of the journal, as no local group of his is known. The first issue was mailed in June of 1981. For a man who had not yet published his first haiku, it was a bold move. He would eventually publish twenty-eight issues, shuttering the journal in 1989.

Shortly after establishing the journal, he established Wind Chimes Press. Its first title was Bob Boldman's *Eating a Melon*, which although it was dated 1981, most likely didn't appear until early 1982 due to printer problems.⁵ The press' fourth title was Roth's own *Behind the Fireflies* (1982), a saddle-stapled chapbook of thirty pages. The chapbook was inspired by a visit to the Civil War battlefield of Antietam. The book's prose is composed of excerpts from contemporary Civil War writings as well as Roth's own descriptions of the battle, while the haiku recount a visit to the battlefield in the present day. For example, a quote from Private David C. Thompson of the Union side,

All were calling for water..., but none was to be had. We lay there.... While bullets snipped the leaves from a young locust-tree growing at the edge of the hollow and powdered us with fragments, we had time to speculate on many things... on the impatience with which men clamor, in dull times, to be led into a fight.⁶

is followed by Roth's haiku:

waves of summer heat
cows huddle
beneath a sycamore

The strategy is similar to the one Bashō employed in his *Oku no Hosomichi* (Narrow Road to the Interior), a recounting of his trip to historic poetic places, that he paired with his own present-day haiku. Reviewer Keith Southward, in a review of *Behind the Fireflies* in *Inkstone* 1.2 (1982), didn't believe in the strategy's effectiveness, noting "Unfortunately, removed from that context [the haiku] become so ambiguous that we are hard pressed to realize they have anything to do with a battlefield." Raymond Roseliep, in *Modern Haiku* 13.3 (1982), appreciated the pairings: "We feel ourselves in the past and in the present at one and the same time. Such unity is what we are all trying to achieve in our haiku." A fairer judgement is probably somewhere in between. While the juxtaposition of the horrors of war and the battlefield's peaceful present-day woods and cornfields makes for interesting poetic commentary, sometimes the jarring back and forth between two time periods can leave a reader disconnected from both. In Bashō's case, he was trying to find unity between his own poetry and that of the past masters. Roth seems to be speaking more of difference than similarity. That said, it is an enjoyable volume.

Two others (without the accompanying prose):

across the still corn	through hazy stillness
two mourning doves	a brass cannon points
in sudden flight	at two lovers

In 1983 Roth published a short sequence with a similar emphasis in *Modern Haiku* 14.1 (1983).

GETTYSBURG, 1982

walking the knoll
 where great-grandfather fell
 in my pocket the weight
 of a minnie ball⁷

this heat —
 here and there
 the red clover

sitting in the shade;
 heat waves
 from the cannon barrel

across the cornfield
 silence
 of a stone bugler

In the first poem, the Minié ball (a hollow-based bullet) is a good link between the two eras. Roth keeps this focus by not going outside objects that existed in both time periods.

The same year also saw publication of his second collection, *The Way the Wind* (1983).⁸ A small chapbook of twenty-two pages, it contains fifteen haiku. It is dedicated “To Her,” presumably his wife Bonnie. For someone who had only been writing haiku for two or three years, Roth’s voice is remarkably mature.

passing rainveil	evening star
her sigh clouds	in line with the lamp
the window pane	in her window

Roth includes a few erotic poems as well, such as:

coming back to it
 the birthmark
 on her thigh

Writing a mixed review in *Inkstone* 2.1 (1983), Keith Southward (after discussing the difficulty of writing love poetry, especially haiku) was disappointed that some of the haiku didn’t indicate love except through the context of the collection itself (i.e. “afternoon sun / her apron sagging / with pears”), and he felt that in a few haiku Roth leaned too heavily on “the kind of comparison between the object of his affection and various phenomena in nature popular in Romantic times” (i.e. “passing rainveil”). Yet he enjoyed several of the haiku, including the title poem:

the way the wind
arranges her hair
... rearranges it

Robert Spiess, in *Modern Haiku* 14.3 (1983), enjoyed the collection and noted that, despite the appearance of “her” in each of the poems, the collection never got monotonous. He concluded his brief review by calling the chapbook “15 beautifully reserved love haiku.” Perhaps the most favorable report was an Honorable Mention in the annual Haiku Society of America’s Merit Book Awards.

The following year Roth published his third chapbook, *Touching the Stone Ax* (1984), also published by his own Wind Chimes Press.⁹ The chapbook is thirty-two pages, and contains prose and thirteen haiku from his readings and at least one trip to America’s southwestern desert. The readings are varied: ethnological studies on native peoples as well as travelogues. These are paired, in a fashion similar to *Behind the Fireflies*, with his haiku. Roth doesn’t delve into the native people’s culture and how it might intersect with his own. Instead, the poems are travel poems, and the prose colors the settings in the way the prose of a travel haibun might. The prose, “Mounting a sand slope deep in the canyon, we came upon an alcove whose walls once served as canvas for a primitive Indian artist,” is paired with Roth’s haiku:

wind in a high arch
the kachina’s foot
is raised

Two others (without the accompanying prose), including the title poem:

noon sun
accenting strike marks
on the turquoise core

touching the stone ax
my pale fingers

Reviewer Chuck Brickley, in *Modern Haiku* 16.1 (1985), included the collection in a joint review with Ruth Yarrow’s *Down Marble Canyon* (Wind Chimes Press, 1984), noting that both were “books of haiku relating their author’s journeys into the desert canyons of the American

West.” Of the two, he preferred Yarrow’s, pointing out that its immediacy was more satisfying than Roth’s intellectualizations. Still, he found many of the haiku “witty and thought-provoking.”

The period of 1981 to 1984 was the most fertile period for Roth. Of his one hundred and fifty-eight recorded haiku, one hundred and three (65%) were published during that period. Over the next few years he published only a handful of haiku. One suspects the production of the journal was getting to him; it is worth noting that *Wind Chimes* was produced without the aid of a computer. He had in late 1983 confided to Roseliep that he felt the quality of the work submitted to *Wind Chimes* was slipping. Additionally, Roth’s first marriage was in trouble, and he would shortly divorce.

One bright note was his retirement in 1985 from school administration.¹⁰ To celebrate the event, haikuist Carol Wainwright reached out to forty-two poets published in *Wind Chimes*. The result was a presentation book, printed and bound by Rod Willmot’s Burnt Lake Press, titled *Shack Talk*—in reference to the out-building on Roth’s property from which he edited the journal. In a note to Jerry Kilbride, one of the contributors, Wainwright wrote: “Hal was surprised & very pleased.”

While Roth would continue to publish the occasional haiku in journals, he didn’t publish much more until his final chapbook, *Her Daughter’s Eyes*, in 1990.¹¹ The collection contains eighteen haiku, seven of which had been published as the sequence “Haiku for Laura Joy” in *Frogpond* 11.2 (1988).

The book is also dedicated to “Laura Joy,” presumably Roth’s grandchild, and it relates an adult and child’s outing sequenced as a day in the woods. As reviewer Patricia Neubauer wrote in *Modern Haiku* 22.3 (1991), it is a day of “quiet joy and poignant sorrow, of discovery and re-discovery, of loving and letting go.” There is a quietness to many of the poems which lends a gentleness to the relationship: grandfather to granddaughter. A few favorites:

her breath into mist —
not a trace remains
of the winter swans

last geese northward —
I let her win our race
to the climbing tree

egg broken:
 she looks to me
 for the song

piggyback up the stairs —
 on her bed
 the white bear waits

Neubauer ends her review by noting, “It has been several years since Hal Roth informed us that ‘... it is time to move on,’ wrote the last page in the final issue of WIND CHIMES, and unobtrusively disappeared from the haiku scene. With the publication of *Her Daughter’s Eyes*, we are suddenly aware that we have missed his gentleness and unassuming integrity...” The volume earned a Second Place in the 1991 Haiku Society of America Merit Book Awards.

Roth’s haiku output after 1990 was four standalone haiku, two linked verse collaborations, and a single haibun in 1997. After thirty-nine titles, the last nine from Anne McKay, Roth closed Wind Chimes Press in 1999. After haiku he took up photography and wrote several books on the history and folklore of Maryland’s Eastern Shore.¹² He married again, but unfortunately the union was short lived, and the couple divorced in 2002. Roth passed away on January 2, 2023, after a long battle with cancer.

NOTES:

Thanks to Loras College for access to the Roseliep letters, as well as Michael Dylan Welch and Billie Wilson for use of their libraries.

¹ Some confusion here. His Obituary, written by his family lists advanced studies at Univ. of Maryland, however his publisher of historical non-fiction, Secant Publishing, lists Lehigh University.

² Rot 1-60 (Using Loras College cataloging of Roseliep-Roth letters).

³ See Miller, Paul. “Brief History of Wind Chimes (1981–1989)” in *Modern Haiku* 52:2.

⁴ Rot 1-59.

⁵ Rot 1-45.

⁶ Roth, Hal. *Behind the Fireflies*. Glen Burnie, Md.: Wind Chimes Press, 1982.

⁷ Roth was probably guessing at the spelling. In fact the hollow-based bullet was named for its inventor, the Frenchman Claude-Étienne Minié.

⁸ Roth, Hal. *The Way the Wind*. Glen Burnie, Md.: Wind Chimes Press, 1983.

⁹ Roth, Hal. *Touching the Stone Ax*. Glen Burnie, Md.: Wind Chimes Press, 1984.

¹⁰ Robert Spiess' poem included a headnote: "A Rhymed Letter to Hal for his / June 1985 Retirement." While that is the only note that gives a date, several others mention retirement.

¹¹ Roth, Hal. *Her Daughter's Eyes*. Glen Burnie, Md.: Wind Chimes Press, 1990.

¹² *Conversations in a Country Store*. Salisbury, Md.: Secant Publishing, 1995; *You Can't Never Get to Puckum*. Vienna, Md.: Nanticoke Books, 1997; *Now This is the Truth... and Other Lies*. Vienna, Md.: Nanticoke Books, 2004; *Murder On Delmarva*. Vienna, Md.: Nanticoke Books, 2009.