

The following two haiku illustrate what Andrelczyk refers to in his haibun “Middleground” as “the slower road out of my Frozenvillemind:”

setting sun	slow afternoon
the old man catching fish	refilling the salt shaker
and letting them go	then the pepper one

I can't think of a more relevant description of this twilight zone we face. One of the questions that comes up daily is “What is essential?” There are the tangible things like food, but there are intangible things to consider too. Now when I read *Dissolving* in light of a shelter-in-place order and social-distancing mandates, my response is, “Poetry is essential.” These haiku by Mike Andrelczyk form an oasis that allows us to dream, to hope, and to imagine. It's a release and a relief—the perfect antidote to counter the barrage of bad news. We can either become numb or we can read, write, and share. I choose the latter. Start here. Start now.

One Leaf Detaches, by Margaret Chula (United Kingdom: Alba Publishing, 2019). 54 pages; 5" × 8". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-912773-24-4. Price: \$15.00 from the author at margaretechula.com

Reviewed by Michael Dylan Welch

sudden gust
the sway of bamboo
one leaf detaches

Western haiku focusing on stereotypical Japanese subjects such as bamboo or kimonos are sometimes overly imitative—or “Japanesey,” which rhymes with cheesy. It's a rare poet who can pull off these subjects in English, to suggest Zen detachment in this case, and it helps if the poet has lived in Japan, which aids them in presenting authentic personal encounters—true heartwood rather than the veneer of imagined or borrowed experiences. Indeed, tourist experiences (my own included)

may not measure up to the lived-in sort of poems that have earned their authenticity, being like old slippers worn about the house.

Margaret Chula is a poet who has earned the authenticity in her haiku about Japan. She and her husband lived in Kyoto for a dozen years, and her first haiku book, *Grinding My Ink* (Katsura Press, 1993), testifies to that experience. *One Leaf Detaches*, published in 2019 by Alba Publishing (with a striking cover photo by John Einarsen, of *Kyoto Journal* notoriety), extends her prior experience to a more recent month-long visit to Kyoto. As a result, the poems drink deeply of her Japanese immersion, and readers can visit Japan vicariously through her poems.

It's not generalizations of Japan we visit, however, but specific details, as if zoomed in on, like the face of a roadside Buddha, a woman chanting lines from a Noh drama, a specific number of rocks in a Zen garden (clearly Ryōan-ji), or details such as the following:

Buson's hut
a caterpillar makes its way
up the scroll painting

We can feel that Chula is at Buson's hut when she shares this poem, and revel in her close attention, connecting both the human and natural, the past and present. Other poems take on the aura or setting of Japan, even if not specifically Japanese, as in

sound of the wind
through dead leaves
bird song at dusk

and in references such as a tolling bell or "after the typhoon."

The book's poems unfold gracefully at one per page, occasionally with a note of explanation, such as a sentence about lespedeza, or bush clover, being a traditional autumn flower of Japan. Yet no explanation is offered for Raikyū Temple, for example, no doubt because we can easily imagine any Buddhist temple we might know. In this way, readers are both guided and trusted at the same time.

Not to be overlooked in this restrained collection of forty-seven poems is their underlying connection to nature (and sometimes to the seasons—with autumn prevailing). As John Stevenson observes of Chula on the back cover, “she imbues her work with a sense of continuity with the deeper roots of the [haiku] genre.” These roots are not just Japan and its heritage but also nature in all its grand and subtle variations. It is significant, too, that the book begins with an epigraph from potter Bernard Leach: “There is a wild and untamable beauty in man when he is in harmony with nature.” That’s the ultimate theme of *One Leaf Detaches*. It’s not just the Japanese settings and subjects that matter, but their connection—and the poet’s connection—to nature at almost every turn. Indeed, most poems combine human and natural elements to create an inviting engagement:

ancient pine tree
 propped up with bamboo
 I unfold my legs

Poems, too, are at times deftly paired, as with the following:

end of autumn	at Murasaki’s grave
our vacant house	birds chitter from trees
strangled by kudzu	roar of traffic

The first poem focuses on the home where the poet once lived in Kyoto, and how it has been affected by change. The second poem offers a similar theme, and both haiku, in a way, are about graves and all that remains, connecting the timely to the timeless.

Perhaps jarring, however, is the occasional poem that seems not innately relevant to Japan, as in the references to coyotes (a North American species) and a hunter’s moon (which I believe to be a Native American term). And one or two poems have no nature in them, but that exclusion is the point, in this case creating humor:

while meditating
 at Ryōan-ji
 his cell phone rings

Here and there a poem reports Japanese experience, to be sure, but perhaps not as successfully for seeming to be slight—although even these few poems add to the appreciation and color of Japan and its culture:

chanting
 the Heart Sutra
 crackle of incense

Another poem hides an unexplained allusion:

holding the water
 held by it
 lotus

The allusion, which I imagine not every reader would pick up on, is to a 1970 poem by William J. Higginson:

Holding the water
 held by it—
 the dark mud.

Chula's poem is transformative, moving from the mud of reality to the enlightenment of the lotus. In this, as in most of her poems, we feel a reverence and love for nature as seen through the lens of her love of Japan. To close, here is one more favorite poem, about the art of noticing, from this recommended and suitably understated volume:

not seeing it
 till darkness fills the pond
 the white carp