

Haiku Poet Interviews: Gary Hotham

Questions Provided by Jacob D. Salzer

Country of Residence: USA

Current Occupation: Working part-time as an archivist for the Department of Defense

Past Occupations: Retired in 2014 after working for over 40 years as an intel analyst for the Department of Defense

Interests/Hobbies: Too many interests and not enough time. I do a lot of photography. Since I purchased a digital camera in 2004, I can take pictures of every fascinating thing I see with many variants. I am the grandsons' (now 7 & almost 10) personal paparazzi.

Solo Collections: My first chapbook was published in 1976: *Without the Mountain* and now, twenty-three chapbooks later, Susan Entsminger of Pinyon Publishing in Colorado has created a handmade chapbook in 2023: *Soft Serve: Haiku Remains*.

Long Collections:

Breath Marks: Haiku to Read in the Dark (1999)

Spilled Milk: Haiku Destinies (2010)

Stone's Throw: Promises of Mere Words (2015)

Anthologies & Collaborations:

My haiku have appeared in many anthologies since the first one in 1974: *The Haiku Anthology: English Language Haiku by Contemporary American and Canadian Poets* edited by Cor van den Heuvel (Anchor/Doubleday). The sad thing about copies of that anthology is that they are falling apart with age – rather like me. My work also appears in the two later anthologies edited by Cor van den Heuvel in 1986 (Simon & Schuster) and 1999 (Norton).

Other Anthologies:

- *Haiku Moment: An Anthology of Contemporary North American Haiku* edited by Bruce Ross (Tuttle, 1993)
- *Haiku World: An International Poetry Almanac* edited by Bill Higginson (Kodansha International, 1996)
- *The Haiku Seasons: Poetry of the Natural World* edited by Bill Higginson (Kodansha International, 1996)
- *Global Haiku: Twenty-Five Poets World-Wide* edited by George Swede and Randy Brooks (Mosaic Press, 2000)
- *The Acorn Book of Contemporary Haiku* edited by Lucien Stryk and Kevin Bailey (Acorn Book Company, 2000)
- *The New Haiku* edited by John Barlow and Martin Lucas (Snapshot Press, 2002)
- *Haiku 21* edited by Lee Gurga and Scott Metz (Modern Haiku Press, 2011)
- *Succinct: The Broadstone Anthology of Short Poems* edited by Jonanthan Greene and Robert West (Broadstone, 2013)
- *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years* edited by Jim Kacian, Philip Rowland, and Allan Burns (W. W. Norton & Company, 2013)

Haiku Translations:

My haiku have been translated and appeared in Polish, French, and German anthologies, and maybe some others I don't know about! When we last lived in Germany, I discovered some my haiku in an anthology one day while browsing in a local bookstore. I was surprised since I had not been asked permission to publish them.

More Windows than Home: Selected Haiku 1976-2016 is a major source of my haiku translated into Hebrew by Dror Burstein and published in Israel. It has gone through more than one printing (over a thousand copies).

Journal Publications:

In recent years: *Acorn*, *Frogpond*, *The Heron's Nest*, *Mariposa*, *bottle rockets*, *Modern Haiku*, *Presence*, *Noon*, *Solitary Plover*, *Blithe Spirit*, *Seashores*, *tsuri-dōrō*.

In the past: *Quadrant*, *Shearsman*, *Hummingbird*, *Woodnotes*, *Tundra*, *Lilliput Review*, *Longhouse*, *Inkstone*, *Persimmon*, *still*, *Northeast*, *Beloit Poetry Review*, *South by Southeast*, and others that don't come to mind at this time.

Awards for Books/Chapbooks:

Haiku Society of America Merit Book Awards 2000, 1st place for *Breath Marks: Haiku to Read in the Dark* (Canon Press, 1999)

Haiku Society of America Merit Book Awards – Honorable Mentions:

1981: *Against the Linoleum* (Yiqralo Press, 1979)

2008: *Missed Appointment: The Haiku Art* (Lilliput Review, 2007)

2011: *Spilled Milk: Haiku Destinies* (Pinyon Publishing, 2010)

Touchstone Distinguished Book Award for 2019: honorable mention - *Rightsizing the Universe: Haiku Theory* (Yiqralo Press, 2019)

Haiku Canada 2020 Maxianne Bluger Award for Chapbooks, honorable mention - 23 (Longhouse Publishing, 2019)

Haiku Canada 2022 Maxianne Bluger Award for Chapbooks, honorable mention for *Mannequins Dressed for the Window: Haiku Secrets* (Yiqralo Press, 2021)

When and how were you introduced to haiku & Japanese-related poetry?

I first heard about haiku during my 10th grade English class. I wasn't writing poetry at the time, but when I did, I tried to write haiku. Of the poetry I was writing, haiku were the ones being accepted. If you want more detail about my encounter with haiku, check out my essay: "I was a Teenage Haiku Writer" or "God Bless you Mrs. Maloney Wherever You Are" in *Woodnotes* #31 in 1997 and a revised one is included as the preface to my collection: *Spilled Milk: Haiku Destinies*.

You've been writing English language haiku for over 55 years now. What do you enjoy the most about haiku?

The challenge in saying in a few words something that evokes in me—and hopefully in others—a moment in time or a state of being. It is the naming of those moments, as I expressed in the preface to my collection, *Breath Marks: Haiku to Read in the Dark* and is much like Adam who named the living creatures God brought to him. I feel the poet is naming a moment or state of being with a haiku. There is a lot of wonder in all of creation and I hope that my haiku suggests that wonder.

A while back in a *Paris Review* interview, Billy Collins was asked what makes a poet. He said: "I think a love of language and a sense of gratitude would be two ingredients in the recipe for making a poet." I think most of us would agree that a love of language is very important for making a poet. He goes on to say: "There's a very deep strain of existential gratitude that runs through a lot of poetry. It's certainly in haiku. Almost every haiku says the same thing: 'It's amazing to be alive here.'" It is a wonder.

You spent your youth in northern Maine, but made your home in Maryland. You also lived with your wife and daughter in Japan, Germany, and England. What are some of your favorite

memories from living abroad? How has living in other countries informed your poetry?

Growing up in northern Maine is probably responsible for the many haiku with snow in them. Living in Maryland is probably responsible for a more kind and gentler winter snow.

Japan was a great experience because I saw a culture close up that was so different from America. It also gave me a better understanding of the scenery in the Japanese haiku I read in translation. It was great to see pampas grass for the first time. Now I have it in my garden. It is everywhere these days in America.

The first time we lived in Germany it was in Bavaria. Probably the best part of the country is its scenery. In northern Maine there are mountains, but nothing as spectacular as the Alps. Also, I am a great fan of bread and in Germany there were bakeries everywhere with a variety of fresh crusty rolls and loaves. When we moved back from Germany the first time, the saddest moment on a Saturday morning was that there was no local bakery to walk to for some fresh bread.

Living in England was a good reminder of how much alike and how different people can be who speak the same language. It was frustrating to have someone speak to me in English and yet, I could not understand a word they were saying. While in England, I joined the British Haiku Society and attended some of their conferences. It was good to make personal acquaintances with some poets who I had only known from their haiku in journals or anthologies. At one of the first conferences, I was surprised to find Lee Gurga (President of the HSA at the time) in attendance. England has a very gentle and scenic countryside. The sheep safely graze since the country has no bears or wolves.

Like Germany and other parts of Europe we visited, there is a tremendous amount of history that goes back thousands of

years. Five-hundred-year-old buildings in England are very common and are also found in Germany and other parts of Europe as well. One of the very interesting things about the old buildings in Germany was that many of them were bombed flat during WWII. In some cities there were postcards of famous buildings showing them before the war and then right after the war (after they were bombed), and there were also pictures of them today all back together again. It might be easy to put buildings and cities back together, but I'm not quite so sure about a culture.

You were recently named the Honorary Curator for the American Haiku Archives at the California State University in Sacramento from 2022-2023. What is that experience like? What do you enjoy the most about this role?

I appreciate the honor and it made me realize how long I have been part of the English-language haiku world. The great thing about being the honorary curator is that there are no strict duties I must keep up with. It's relatively easy work but of course no pay either.

You have volunteered as the First Vice President of the Haiku Society of America for over five years. What do you enjoy the most about this role?

I became a member of the HSA in 1975. Over the years I was too busy with my personal life to do anything other than judge a contest for HSA. With the extra time I had outside of family and work, I wanted to focus on writing haiku. But when I retired from full-time work in 2014, I was ready to do more for the HSA. I edited the HSA Members' Anthology for 2014, *Take-out Window*, and a couple years later, when the 1st Vice President wanted to step down, I volunteered. So now the HSA executive committee gets my opinion/input on the various issues that come their way. Also, as the 1st VP I administer the HSA Merit Book awards and carefully select the judges each year. I am also very grateful to those who have

said yes to the job. It is a major task to read all the submissions and decide which ones should be given an award. They have taken the work on with great care. I have been pleased by the quality of the awards. The best part about the position is that I'm the one who lets the winners know their book has been chosen for an award.

You also serve on the editorial staff of the yearly Red Moon Anthologies. What is that experience like? What do you enjoy the most about this role?

I was on the Touchstone Haiku Award group a few years ago. All I had to do for that is read a massive amount of work submitted by others. The most challenging part of the work was arranging the group selections at various states of the process from best favorite to least favorite. It was difficult at times when there were haiku I thought should have been selected that year but were not. The Red Moon anthology process is different. I have the task of going through certain journals for what I consider good nominees, but I can nominate haiku from other publications as well. As a result, the judges end up with a large number of haiku to choose from. It can be a bit mind numbing and best done in short time segments. When the anthology comes out, it is of great interest to see which haiku I have nominated and voted for made it.

What do you enjoy the most about tanka?

I enjoy reading tanka. After a period of writing some a few years ago and having some published, I decided it was not the genre for me.

What do you enjoy the most about haibun?

The haiku. I read the haiku first and if it's good I might read the prose that went with it.

What haiku/writing projects are you currently working on?

Writing English-language haiku is my big project. My writing schedule is Monday through Saturday and I try to engage with my writing notebook for at least an hour during some part of the day. Morning is best, but many times I write in the afternoon. It is easy to be distracted and lose focus.

Notes:

1. "Gary Hotham," *Poets & Writers*, October 15, 2022.
https://www.pw.org/directory/writers/gary_hotham
2. "Gary Hotham," *Haikupedia*, September 2, 2021.
<https://haikupedia.org/article-haikupedia/gary-hotham/>

Gary Hotham retired from employment in the Department of Defense as an intelligence analyst after more than 40 years of service, but he is still working part time as an archivist for the DoD. He has been writing and publishing haiku since 1966 and, beginning in 1976, has published more than 20 collections of his work, including two holographic chapbooks. His work has frequently been honored in haiku competitions and by inclusion in dozens of haiku anthologies, including all three editions of Cor van den Heuvel's *The Haiku Anthology* (1974, 1986, 1999); Bruce Ross's *Haiku Moment* (1993); George Swede and Randy Brooks's *Global Haiku: Twenty-five Poets World-wide* (2000); John Barlow and Martin Lucas's *The New Haiku* (2002), and Lee Gurga and Scott Metz's *Haiku 2020: 100 notable ku from 2019*. Over the years Hotham has served as a judge for a number of contests and is currently First Vice President of the Haiku Society of America. He also serves on the editorial staff of the yearly *Red Moon* anthologies. He resides in Scaggsville, Maryland.