

frogpond



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Forbearance of Forebears: Amy Lowell and (One of) Her Critics

by Rod Willmot

Amy Lowell has not fared well over the years. Although she was after Pound the prime mover among Imagists, and although she was a tireless writer and a master propagandist for poetry as she saw it, her work now is little read and less admired. Lowell did try her hand at haiku, however, and for this at least she deserves a retrospective. In more ways than might at first be imagined, Amy Lowell is a precursor of the contemporary haiku movement in North America.

Imagism¹ as a literary movement spanned about a decade, from 1908 to 1917. It was a loose agglomeration of British and American poets, centered in London and led first by T.E. Hulme, then Ezra Pound, then Lowell. The group and its anthologies included several writers of the first rank—James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and of course Pound—whose best work would be achieved long after they had abandoned Imagism. However, right from the beginning the rules of Imagism were honored more in the breaking than the keeping, with rare exceptions, such as the chiselled poems of H.D.

The best-known formulation of Imagist doctrine is in the Preface to the 1915 anthology, the first of three that were edited by Lowell. Of the six rules, the fourth is perhaps the most revealing:

4. To present an image (hence the name: "Imagist"). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. It is for this reason that we oppose the cosmic poet, who seems to us to shirk the real difficulties in his art.

Imagist doctrine was a necessary reaction against the decadent phase of Romanticism, the "magnificent and sonorous" imprecisions of poets like Swinburne. Its cultural function was not so much to produce Imagist poems as it was to clear the air, to make way for Modernism. Ironically, the best *en masse* exemplar of Imagism is contemporary haiku: but in 1915 the western world was simply not ready for haiku as we write it today.

For most of us writing haiku now, the form is a natural and essential means of expression. For the Imagists however, haiku was merely

one among a vast number of literary borrowings, whose interest lay never in themselves but rather in their novelty, their potential contribution to the forging of a new poetry. The sources included Hebrew, French Symbolism, Provençal love-songs, classical Greek, ancient Chinese, and of course Japanese tanka and haiku. We should not be surprised to find a remarkable strain of exoticism in Imagist poetry.

Turning now to Lowell, if I say that she is very much an Imagist it will be understood that she bears little resemblance to a contemporary haikuist. That at least is the message of the chapter devoted to Lowell in Barbara Ungar's *Haiku in English*.² However, I would prefer to suggest that Lowell does indeed resemble contemporary haikuists, not in what we are supposed to be, but in what we are. The points on which Ungar catches Lowell out, while in themselves critically valid, are applied with a blind exclusivism whose ultimate victim would be haiku itself.

Under red umbrellas with cream-white centres,
A procession of Geisha passes
In front of the silk-shop of Matsuzaka-ya.
(206)³

In the sky there is a moon and stars,
And in my garden there are yellow moths
Fluttering about a white azaela bush.
(207)

Ungar rejects the first poem for being overly visual, as well as for its exoticism. The first charge is a strange one, since it is not so long ago that some of us were defining haiku as a visual image, and the vast majority of haiku anywhere are solely visual. The decorative, almost painterly quality of Lowell's poem is if anything more sophisticated than much of what we accept nowadays, and we would do well to remember that our *Japanese* forebears include many who had a similar esthetic. As for the charge of exoticism, how many of our contemporaries are entirely clear of it? Is exoticism with Geisha any worse than exoticism with Buddha?

Lowell's prodigious appetite for exotica was integral to her personality, hence to the psychological climate of her poems. Comments of a similar nature would apply to other idiosyncratic poets, like Santoka and Issa, whose works we necessarily read with a powerful sense of the personality behind them. If read naked so to speak, the second poem above comes out exactly as Ungar judges it: "too intellec-

tual and analytical. It has nothing to do with the deep inner nature of these objects.”⁴ But if read with a sense of personality, the poem clearly implies a third element of comparison, which is the inner state of the observer. Far from being intellectual, it evokes an impression of shimmering uncertainty in the psychological landscape.

Other points in Ungar’s criticism depend upon a highly debatable dogmatism towards haiku. If Lowell does show “a lack of understanding of haiku as nature poem,” (15) this fact would elicit the sympathy of the many fine haikuists whose work is increasingly urban or human in orientation. If Lowell indeed “missed the philosophical underpinnings of the form,” (20) this fact would endear her to the many haikuists for whom the supposed underpinnings have become a strait-jacket, or a fantasy—made in America.

Let’s look at the poems as they are, and with open minds. There are not many: two or three dozen 2- and 3-line poems from *Pictures of the Floating World*, along with a number of 4-liners perhaps. Then there are the “Twenty-four Hokku on a Modern Theme,” and another twenty-four verses in 5-7-5 composing a work entitled “The Anniversary.” Some of the strongest images are in poems too long to be called haiku, but which might have come out differently if Lowell had had the benefit of the techniques and abbreviations of 1983. This comes close:

Looking at myself in the metal mirror,
I saw, faintly outlined,
The figure of a crane
Engraved upon its back.

(206)

Like that one, many of the poems betray Lowell’s fantasy-travel to Japan, yet have a feel of authenticity all their own. The following such haiku combines a textural comparison with a contrast between the world of measurement and money and the world of free play:

Over the shop where silk is sold
Still the dragon kites are flying.

(206)

A few of Lowell’s haiku are indistinguishable from the standard fare of contemporary haiku magazines:

Even the iris bends
When a butterfly lights upon it.

(205)

What fell upon my open umbrella—
A plum-blossom?

(207)

Perched upon the muzzle of a cannon
A yellow butterfly is slowly opening and
shutting its wings.

(205)

The last of those may be the first Western imitation of a famous poem by Buson; I can't remember if the most recent was by a Canadian or an American. And finally, here are three poems from "Twenty-four Hokku on a Modern Theme":

Again the larkspur,
Heavenly blue in my garden.
They, at least, unchanged.

Watching the iris,
The faint and fragile petals—
How am I worthy?

Turning from the page,
Blind with a night of labour,
I hear morning crows.

(441-442)

All three of these are structured on the contrast between internal, human dramas and the external world, or "nature." All require the reader to conjure up ("see") not merely an external object but also a person and her state of mind. In the first poem, the last line is *not* a comment on the larkspur! It is a subtle evocation of the whole world of emotion and worry created by a lover's inconstancy. The larkspur's "heavenly blue" is at once a quality of colour and a recognition of the peace they confer. The second poem is similar; feelings of unworthiness are a phenomenon like any other, hence perfectly worthy of perception in a haiku moment.

Concerning the final poem, it is really not necessary to know that Lowell did in fact have to struggle against failing eyesight. This is her truest and most powerful haiku of all. It is rich with effortless resonances, all enhancing the tension between blindness and sight: night, morning, the black squiggles of ink and of the crows. At the deepest level it is a

tension between meaning and absurdity, for depending on how we *hear* the crows they may evoke either sheer nihilism or the gentle joy of knowing. In both cases the struggle for words opens out beyond words, beyond struggle.

Barbara Ungar claims that with this and a couple of other poems Lowell merely “chanced upon good haiku.” (19) I disagree. Not everyone can write even a single fine haiku, no matter how hard they try or how well they know the “rules.” For this poem alone Lowell deserves recognition—and it does fit in with other elements of her haiku-related work. I think she knew perfectly well what she was trying for, but was often trying for things that just now are not “permitted” in American haiku theory. But as with the Imagists, so with the haiku movement: theory is one thing, practice another. Amy Lowell’s contribution to haiku is three-fold: in itself, to the extent that we care to appreciate it; in the fact that it is a beginning on this continent; and in what it reminds us about ourselves.

NOTES

¹For further reading, see William Pratt, *The Imagist Poem* (E.P. Dutton, New York, 1963.) The six rules of Imagism are given on p. 22 of Pratt’s excellent Introduction.

²Barbara Ungar, *Haiku in English*. (Humanities Honors Program, Stanford University, 1978.) See Chapter II, “Imagism, Amy Lowell and the Haiku,” pp. 10-20. Page-references in the text are to this study.

³Page-references following poems are to *The Complete Poetical Works of Amy Lowell*, with Introduction by Louis Untermeyer. (Houghton Mifflin, Boston.) To save space I have omitted the titles of individual poems.

⁴Ungar, p. 18. Even the finer haiku poets occasionally write works that are “too intellectual and analytical,” or what I call schematic. The charge is again no excuse for excluding Lowell from the ranks.

Living alone,
I've grown eccentric:
the tall marigolds

I've passed the day
without a word to anyone:
the crowding heat

Riding to work,
my lunch bag uncurls
with soft noise

Closing the window:
the tea
you didn't drink

Richard Ellis Tice

office-bound:
through the apricot blossoms
late snow falling

Bridal Veil Falls:
all along the granite cliff—
summer sun

black ahead.
my rearview mirror
fills with sun

after the wedding
the clarity
of the mountain water

Season

Stark winter moon;
the cold under the blankets
getting colder.

white
inside and out;
snow drifts.

Under the streetlamp
the lone passer-by—
faded summer moon.

Stark winter moon;
ice forms thicken
inside the glass.

Alexis Kaye Rotella

alone
in the Chinese restaurant
dropping a chopstick

Against his coat
I brush my lips,
the silence of snowflakes *

morning yoga
the gentle hum
of dragonfly wings

vow of silence. . .
I rinse the salt
from the mung beans

* Awarded the Museum of Haiku Literature Award (of \$25) for the best haiku of this issue.

dawn
the sky presses through
our eyelids

slowly his fingers down my vertebrae

snowdrifts. . .
he takes out the one barrette
holding up my hair

full moon
looking in on
the quilting bee

Our white cat gone,
the flower pot where she perched
holds a mound of snow.

my logic
lost
among the peonies

chanting
making It
rain

on the last note
of the last bird
the last of the warmth

turning the soil
turning the scent

having bought this garden someone else's spring

cloud shadow adds its blue to the iris

a bend in the vee of the wild geese spring wind

nipples tingle high tide

her slow pulse a night of frost

my head in the clouds in the lake

frisking
among the snowflakes
the cop's young mare

sound of hail
falling on rhubarb leaves
bitter parting

for a.k.r.

in gusts of mist
the crag's
unchanging face

Day darkens:
a raven calls from the pine
and flaps off

Charles D. Nethaway, Jr.

3 men sit
1 reflects
2 twiddle

summer climb:
finding another
false peak

flowering columbine
over the creek's
low
flow

gypsy girl
dances for a dime camp
fire in her eyes

a comet
the memory of my father
passes on

summer beach:
boy's bucketful he stirs in
his own thoughts

old stone wall—
child reaches in
the black hole



autumn chill
the fly quiet
on rising bread

spring
all day and all night
the frogs

warm by the fire
the old dog
running in his sleep

the first warmth of spring
the bees
think i'm a flower

David Springer

One the first day of spring,
nothing—
a clear blue sky.

a long spring night—
our alarm clock glows
through it all

I'm offended,—
this blossoming pear tree
deserves a blue sky.

a quiet spring night—
the clicking of neighbor's
dinner plates

On A Visit to My Parent's:

No one's home:
cicadas crying out
in the backyard.

The intense moon.
one by one, fire engines
into the humid night.

One by one,
my neighbors go to sleep:
clothes left on the line.

“A dream of the Snake—”

by Rod Willmot, Hiroaki Sato, and Geoffrey O’Brien

October 1981 – March 1983

A dream of the Snake—
the taste of water
from a bedside cup

Willmot

while asleep she sleeps well
her features delicate

Sato

through clear air
the full moon’s ridges
bulge outward

O’Brien

midge-knotted webs
collapse onto the broom

Willmot

coming in the barn
with a wind, he hugs me
from behind

Sato

at the outskirts of her eyes
a world of cars and glass

O’Brien

amid the fragments
rootbeer's foam
subsiding

Willmot

these protestations & pangs
I know won't last

Sato

patches of snow
glimmering on brick
after the ghost movie

O'Brien

a blue horse rears—
pastels livid on your palms

Willmot

I know you are
to blame—no, I don't know,
I don't know

Sato

sleepless at 4 a.m.
remembering a few words

O'Brien

her hands later
no longer a woman's:
"I've thought it all out"

Willmot

"dream broken": gazelle
turned Garfield

Sato

the light climbs
to the stone edge,
the irises shrink

O'Brien

your shadow smashed on the wall
you try to recite Rossetti

Willmot

drinks and night
deepen and you remain the one
on my mind

Sato

80 years, the body dwindling,
her smile opens up the room

O'Brien

childhood's lake the same blue patch through trees, the path to it narrower	O'Brien
warbling a cardinal flashes into view	Sato
as the devil curtsies laughter sputtering the burn of schnapps	Willmot
Congoese dance band pulses in summer dusk	O'Brien
on Broadway those going and coming stop to listen	Sato
an arm slowly lifts at the end of a leash	Willmot
in a crack at the alley's end the city whirrs	O'Brien
kisses forever lost remembered	Sato
fingertips slipping in and out: paperbacks	Willmot
newborn human eyes open under electric lights	O'Brien
by niece's jolly missive three sour notes I've written	Sato
battered, the shopping-list is almost transparent	Willmot

the sky
filtered through
oscillating balloons

O'Brien

my restless mind
forty years old

Sato

notes, clippings, business-cards
are rearranged:
a postcard of a nude

Willmot

your face,
the shapes of waves

O'Brien

it's cold, and
then it's warm again:
flower torment

Sato

my skin shivers off
as I watch the dawn

Willmot

Margarita Mondrus Engle

Sunday
the orange grove's
empty ladders

roadside
wild sunflowers face
all directions

windwalk
a dog's
muted howl

hot dusk
a lone sunflower
droops

still summer night—
the willow weeps
with no sound

chilly morning—
a dry leaf skitters past
with the jogger

pointing the way the wind went one-armed scarecrow

after Monday's rain the empty clothesline drip-dries

leaving only the aspens waving

Andre Dubaime

translations by Dorothy Howard

a chaque visite
un peu plus grandes
les oreilles de grand-pere

every visit
a little bigger
grandfather's ears

en reve
deux feuilles rouges d'erable
que je ne peux superposer

in a dream
two red maple leaves that
I can't superimpose

le plancher sale
d'amis
sans enfants

childless
friends'
dirty floors

l'herbe plus haute
la ou etait
la maison centenaire

taller grass
where
the heritage home stood

graffiti:
breaking the bitter wind,
the stone saint

museum garden:
after Monet's lilies,
the white moth ®

escalator:
shadows standing still
going up-down

abandoned billboard
sagging to one side. . .
the summer moon

Joyce Currier

cut so carefully,
yet all the petals fall—
last white peony

sound of a frog
this april morning
soaked with rain

light summer shower—
the sound of it
above the elms

Edward Duensing

perfect ring of smoke—
scattered to oblivion
by the child's grasp

Christopher Suarez

after the shower
a thousand tiny suns
on the car hood

little wooden Jesus
his cross held up by
a single nail

flaming maples
still flaming
after the rain

giant sunflower
casting a shadow
across the flower bed

the southern wind
sways the wheat again;
the summer moon

a mountain hike—
clear water flowing strokes
the moss again



old farmstead—
in the winter chill
the duck's quack

sewing a quilt
my grandmother looks up
at the snow

Nick Virgilio

the near cicadas,
then the far cicadas—
now the silent grove

another autumn
still silent in his closet:
father's violin

little brother ashore
shouting: Take me with you!
the frozen marsh

taking a last look
at the nursery, closing
his coloring book

LeRoy Gorman

shade
cicada(')s
call

raingullrain

I throw back curtains
for her to dress in sunlite
the river's folds of ice

I know this road
yet ask my father which way
the geese are going

I tear open the letter from Tokyo
the sun a cherry haze
hangs on in the west

so hard to start on a blank page
I go out to shovel
a path to the street

snowglow
I throw
the match

no one
to share
this pear

HOUSEWIFE

cat and baby
asleep
winter fly

children
snow flaked
sky gone

bird freezing
in her window . . .
to wave it off

icicles lengthen
the wait in stillness
for the sounding

SEASCAPE

turnings
of the body
the sea in us

heart locket
its rise
and fall

in weeds where we love
sudden lantern
of a firefly

the night
of your eye
now night

from dream
my swimmer's arm around you
real shadow

Winter Cold Spell

Increasing chill:
Over the pond, acid rain
Becomes acid snow.

More quiet
Than the voiceless scarecrow. . .
The silent crow.

It's no good for snowballs. . .
My little white lie
To a bed-ridden child.

Long cold spell:
My canary grows to ignore
The tea kettle's whistle.

Under a cold moon. . .
The off-gray color
Of blood on the snow.

Untoasted marshmallows:
Our winter cabin
Has electric heating now.

HSA Sampler

an on-going selection of work being done by members of the Haiku Society of America.

Still that awful coldness
in my bones,
May ends.

Enid Carol Lucas

footprints—
a warm lantern
left on the sand

Ross Figgins

heat lightning
reveals the mesa—
dim Hopi windows

Ruth Yarrow

Application line:
The quiet faces
Wet with rain

Magnus Mack Homestead

The airport beacon
continues its rotation
in the heat lightning.

Right in the middle
of the cat's yawn—
a pink tongue.

Arizona Zipper

sheet lightning—
kissing her
in the chicken house

dusk
the tackling dummy
alone

Hal Roth

High on the hill
The church steeple
Pierces the cloud

Alice Murphy

From the depths
the figurehead looks out
of the TV screen

Margaret Saunders

a fence line
on the snow-covered prairie—
the horizon

Anna Vakar

hot day:
cattle in the stream
cowslip edging in

Sister Mary Thomas Eulberg

memorial day
sun of long ago
breaking through the mists

Jane Andrew

muscle pain
earthworms contracting
after the storm

god
speaks thru the walking stick
slowly

Steve Dalachinsky

I wake from sleep mountains rest massively cool wet summer night

Sister Mary Ann Henn

bee wisps:

thin legs

Jeffery Skeate

touchiNG

her SUNburnt breast—
robiN SONG

TOO HOT

TO embrace Her—
snOw On THE mOunTain peak

Nick Avis

don't be sad, my love,
this crimson maple leaf
is not for you*

Elisabeth Marshall

*Author's note: the reference is to the old Japanese custom of a woman presenting a red maple leaf to a man to say their relationship is finished.

Not a Book Review: jail haiku PENCIL FLOWERS

by Johnny Baranski
and some poems by Issa

Dear Friend and Reader,

Recently a special book came across my editor-librarian's desk, and I wanted to share a few thoughts about it with you.

So often, especially for those of us who are still just beginning to explore the new world of haiku, the dominant impression we get is that only certain subjects are "appropriate" to haiku: moons, cherry blossoms, fenceposts, raindrops. We are also tempted to try for a certain "mood" in haiku somehow inherently "poetic." Not that these are not valid, and certainly many beautiful and moving and sometimes startlingly new poems have been written about the sun on a spring morning.

But it seems to me that, writing haiku in English, we sometimes forget one great contribution of poets like Basho, Buson and Issa and then Shiki and Kyoshi: creating the *hokku* out of a moment of their own experience or realization, not merely as an intellectual exercise or to produce haiku simply because they have proclaimed themselves haiku poets. The best haiku are not just striking images. Nor are they always lovely. They have some reverberation which widens our own horizons a little or a lot, a reverberation set off by something in the poem, perhaps undefinable, that comes from the direct experience of the individual who is the poet.

You may say that all of this is obvious; however, I would like to suggest that while it may (or may not) be obvious, it certainly is not simple. Otherwise, wouldn't we have more English haiku coming directly from the most profound, upshaking experiences people have? And might we not find the material in what has passed for the most mundane in everyday life? Why, for instance, when a jaw-dropping percentage of Americans have been incarcerated at one time or another in their lives, don't we have reams of haiku about the experience of being in jail?

One man, Johnny Baranski, jailed in 1980 for protesting Trident nuclear missiles on a U.S. submarine, has opened up to us a number of moving moments in his just released collection *Pencil Flowers: jail haiku*. The apt title is taken from this poignant poem:

In my jail cell—
a shrinking pencil point
grows many flowers.

The short haiku form, which avoids polemics, is an effective means to evoke the horror of a world many of us might prefer not to see:

Breaking dull routine,
one jail inmate knifes himself
between enemies

Most of the images are less direct and perhaps more chilling on second reading.

From a frosty night
the marigolds I rescued
withered in a cup

A humor which also made me shiver is not senryu:

Long imprisoned
the thief rids his impurity
with some stolen soap.

Different readers will doubtless be struck by different poems. I found a particular strength in

In mid-day heat
a B-52 Bomber drops
the only shade

Locking arms with Kyoshi and Issa, I believe that haiku coming out of direct experience can be more than a memory album. Haiku can provide a way of dealing with experiences and a means of finding meaning in them. Though I have no way of knowing, I suspect that haiku was that for Johnny Baranski. The deepest experiences are sometimes not pretty, at least not on the surface; which is to say the circumstances may not be pretty. Poverty, violence, moments of terror, grief *can* make for beautiful and moving haiku, if they are not self-indulgent. Haiku is a form that lends itself uniquely to the deepening of experience and the understanding of experience, for the poet as well as the reader.

In closing, I would like to place before you some of Issa's haiku which arise directly out of the poet's experiences of poverty, hunger and hardship.

Traveling Alone

he is writing "single"
in his register
it's cold in the night

Traveling Alone

eating by the light
from the neighboring room
ah, the cold

Looking at the State of My House

the Autumn Moon
as you see,
the scrap collector's house

Flood

the bugs crying
as it carries them on
the floating log

the snow is falling
the joking stops
the mountains of Shino

my dead mother
when I see the sea
every time I see the sea

undernourished frog
don't give up
Issa is here

with me—
come and play
orphaned sparrow

this is — whew!
where I used to live
five feet of snow

so beautiful
through the holes in the paper door
the Milky Way

Yours very sincerely,
Sharon Ann Nakazato

HAIKU NEWS

Call for Manuscripts

Lee J. Richmond, editor of *Notes on Modern American Literature* (NMAL), invites submission of manuscripts on translations into English by eminent scholars such as R.H. Blyth, Harold Henderson, and Makoto Ueda of ancient and modern Japanese haïjin. Contributions are to be short and concise (500 to 1,000 words) and relevant to *explication de texte*, genesis, biography, or parallelism. Format should conform to the current *MLA Style Sheet*. Deadline is January 1, 1984. Address: The Editor, NOTES ON MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE, c/o English Department, St. John's University, Jamaica, N.Y. 11439.

Publication Notice

Michigan Natural Resources Magazine has recently begun a poetry column devoted to haiku and short verses on nature themes. This is a bi-monthly publication founded in 1935 and with a current circulation of 150,000. The column is titled *Larksong* and is edited by Joseph J. Lee. Submissions are welcome from all over the country and should be sent to Poetry, MNR, Box 30034, Lansing, MI 48909.

Museum of Haiku Literature Award

The Museum of Haiku Literature Award for the best previously unpublished haiku appearing in frogpond VI:1 has been awarded to Lenard D. Moore for his haiku:

the old woman
looking into the stars
sky all snowy

Farewell

This is my last issue as editor of *frogpond*. I am stepping down as the amount of work required to put out the magazine has become too considerable for my changing life. Over the last two years, my life has taken more twists and turns than I imagined such that I have not always been able to keep up with the mail or production schedules. In addition, I feel the overriding need to get on with my own writing. I hope you have enjoyed the issues and the best of writing to you.

—Bruce Kennedy

