

Allan Burns, ed. *Where the River Goes: The Nature Tradition in English-Language Haiku*. Ormskirk, Great Britain: Snapshot Press, 2013, 479 pp., hardbound, 5.25 x 7.25. ISBN 978-1-903543-36-8, US\$45 (includes shipping & handling with 50% discount) from the publisher at <http://www.snapshotpress.co.uk>.

by Scott Mason, Chappaqua, New York

Burns has done it again . . . only better.

Allan Burns is an excellent haiku poet, but he may be known best in haiku circles for his acclaimed work as an anthologist and commentator, most notably with the serialized *Montage* feature he developed on behalf of the nascent Haiku Foundation five years ago and subsequently published, in an augmented edition, as *Montage: The Book* (Haiku Foundation, Winchester, VA, 2010). *Montage* artfully juxtaposed selected haiku from featured poets in a variety of themed “galleries,” each with its own thought-provoking introduction, in a novel approach praised by Peggy Willis Lyles as “one of the finest projects ever to focus on English-language haiku.”<sup>1</sup> He also co-edited, with Philip Rowland and editor-in-chief Jim Kacian, the highly anticipated *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), launched with much fanfare aboard the Queen Mary at Haiku North America in Long Beach, California this past August.

For his latest act Allan Burns has produced yet another haiku anthology, one that returns us to the genre’s original source of inspiration: the natural world. *Where the River Goes* proves a journey well worth taking, especially with poet-naturalist-scholar-editor Burns as our expert guide.

That journey begins with a thoughtful introduction orienting us to the strategic choices behind the book and the critical issues related to its chosen subject matter, “the nature tradition in English-language haiku.” The first strategic choice is one of definition: what exactly qualifies as a “nature haiku” and what

doesn't? Not surprisingly the answer is anything but exact since English-language haiku poetry exists on a continuum of nature (and non-nature) content. Undaunted, Burns makes effective use of a haiku typology suggested by George Swede in 1992, selecting as his primary focus "nature-oriented haiku with no reference to humans or human artifacts."<sup>2</sup> Such poems may have represented a large share, if not the majority, of haiku published in 1963 at what Burns calls "the identifiable beginnings of the English-language haiku movement" coincident with the first issue of *American Haiku*. (1963 seems a plausible enough date for the start of that movement even though, as Burns readily acknowledges, individual English-speaking poets made forays into the genre in the years before.) Today such poems represent a distinct minority—perhaps just ten percent—of published haiku, the decline corresponding to "a kind of anthropocentric creep that mirrors an accelerating alienation of humans from the natural world." So Burns explicitly identifies *Where the River Goes* as "a specialty or themed anthology rather than a general one."

Another key strategic choice was to limit the number of featured poets to just forty "crucial 'voices,'" all with "substantial bodies of self-effacing haiku oriented principally toward nature" and each represented in the book by no fewer than 15 haiku. Based on Burns's stated criteria, one could hardly gainsay most of his poet picks. Furthermore, his decision to limit the roster to forty was a propitious one, affording readers an in-depth examination of each poet's work instead of only the tantalizing peek offered in most haiku venues . . .

Shooting the rapids!

—a glimpse of a meadow  
gold with buttercups

Robert Spiess

The critical subject-related issues addressed in Burns's introduction include such heady matters as the nature of Nature, the nature of haiku, and how both have changed across cultures (Japan and the West) and the centuries. These subjects might prove elusive in lesser hands, but Burns could wrangle

eels. He braids these subjects into a lucid and engrossing narrative that treats the spiritual underpinnings of classical haiku, the origins of Western nature consciousness, and a host of other related topics, in the process marshalling an impressive volume of relevant source material. If his lengthy cataloging of adverse human effects on the natural world tilts towards the polemical (he devotes five full pages to the subject), Burns does not allow his obvious passion to occlude his intellect. Quite the contrary: it soon becomes clear that he sees the type of nature sensitivity fostered by an appreciation of nature-oriented haiku as the best hope for a shift in human perceptions and attitudes more conducive to the preservation of our fellow species and planet. One can certainly hope he's right.

Nature haiku, as defined, might indeed be "self-effacing" in nearly every case. Still, it takes a human to make a haiku. Burns is quick to state as much: "Only a human can convert observations of the natural world into poetry." One of the pleasant paradoxes of this nature haiku anthology is the amount of "human interest" contained in the headnotes, or what I will call here its poet profiles, appearing before each featured poet's selected haiku. Scrupulously researched, those profiles offer interesting and relevant biographical information, but also much more: intriguing philosophical takes; the recognition of cross-poet influences; and perceptive discussions of haiku craftsmanship.

In the first category, it's illuminating to hear, and see applied, snippets of "color commentary" such as Michael McClintock's admonition about the misuse of nature in haiku "as a kind of toy, pet, or stage prop for some banal moment or human activity."<sup>3</sup> In the second category, it can be fascinating to compare work of poets where an influence is suggested or openly acknowledged, as by the latter poet here:

a snowy owl  
swoops in and turns  
the snow gray

John Wills

dark waters  
the snowy egret  
having flown

Jim Kacian

Burns proves especially adept in his treatment of haiku craftsmanship. His serious interest in cinema—amply demonstrated through his *Montage* initiative as well as in an essay published by this journal in 2007<sup>4</sup>—figures into his evocation of the “zoom” and “match-cut” film editing techniques in his discussion of the images from these two poems:

overgrown pasture:  
the feathered talon of a dead owl  
clutching a weed stalk

Elizabeth Searle Lamb

Milky Way  
a stream of termites  
from the woodpile

Lorin Ford

Burns also takes note of how special sound effects often play a vital role in the best nature-oriented haiku: “Perhaps the idea of being ‘in harmony’ or ‘in tune’ with one’s surroundings translates itself, naturally, into the language of the poems themselves.” He extolls the first of the following two haiku for sound patterns that arise “from original experience,”<sup>5</sup> and the second for how “the last two lines form a perfect iambic pentameter unit, the alternating unstressed and stressed syllables suggesting the steady wing beats of the approaching osprey.”<sup>6</sup>

lifting mist . . .  
a flock of knots fans out  
across the creek

Matthew Paul

thunderheads offshore  
the osprey coming early  
to its nest

Peggy Willis Lyles

In a similar vein, each of these two poems “echoes” its subject through onomatopoeia, in the first instance with the word “coo” cleverly embedded in “coolness.”

mourning dove  
answers mourning dove—  
coolness after the rain

Wally Swist

tropical night surf  
each crash and hiss  
phosphoresces

Ruth Yarrow

Superb as its introduction and poet profiles happen to be, *Where the River Goes* must ultimately sink or swim on the basis of the work it anthologizes. Here, too, it does not disappoint. While Burns may choose to classify his volume as “a specialty or themed anthology,” I believe it could appeal to a broader swath of the reading public than pure nature lovers, even with its liberal seasoning of specialized nature references (usually well worth a quick search engine query).

These are haiku that not only reward individual attention but also invite a poetic “dialogue” with one another. Consider, for instance, the half dozen pairings presented here:

November field  
a bird dog sculptured  
by the scent of a quail

Charles B. Dickson

quail eggs!  
my foot  
in mid-air

Marian Olson

white wind the eyes of a dead seal missing

Carolyn Hall

forest skull's  
sockets hold  
my eyes

John Martone

Autumn colours  
breaking through the haze  
a wood duck settles

vincent tripi

autumn sunset  
a wood stork's pink feet  
stirring silt

Ferris Gilli

Deep within the stream  
the huge fish lie motionless  
facing the current

James W. Hackett

steppingstone  
a hiker rests  
in the river's wind

Paul MacNeil

rucksack  
in the tall grass  
the scent of honeysuckle

Allan Burns

flattened grass  
where the bear slept  
stink of salmon

Billie Wilson

gosling following its neck to the bug

Marlene Mountain

the mountain path  
winding up  
at a snail

Peter Yovu

Towards the end of his introduction, Burns declares: “The best nature haiku from across the English tradition transcend *shasei* [sketches from nature] and attain genuine resonance.” The nearly nine hundred poems that follow not only prove his point but also match or surpass in quality that of any general interest compilation of haiku to appear since the third edition of Cor van den Heuvel’s *The Haiku Anthology* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

Elegantly designed by John Barlow of Snapshot Press and brilliantly conceived and executed by Allan Burns, *Where the River Goes* represents a welcome “homecoming” celebration for the natural world in English-language haiku. Any serious student of the genre should find this volume indispensable; its introduction alone stands out as the best piece of haiku scholarship I’ve encountered since Haruo Shirane’s landmark *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Memory, and the Poetry of Bashō* (Stanford University Press, 1998).

All things considered, I regard *Where the River Goes* as the finest book of and about English-language haiku to emerge so far this century.

Self-effacing nature-oriented haiku may have lost “market share” in the last fifty years, but *Where the River Goes* offers heartening evidence that they still represent a vital current in the overall English-language haiku movement.

fields flooded—  
beneath the surface, somewhere,  
the river bends

Christopher Herold

### Notes

1. From the Foreword to *Montage: The Book* (Winchester, VA: Haiku Foundation, 2010).
2. From the Introduction to *Where the River Goes: The Nature Tradition in English-Language Haiku* (Ormskirk, Great Britain:

Snapshot Press, 2013); all subsequent quotations are from the Introduction (pp. 9–68) unless otherwise noted.

3. Allan Burns (ed.), *Where the River Goes: The Nature Tradition in English-Language Haiku* (Ormskirk, Great Britain: Snapshot Press, 2013), 137.

4. Allan Burns, “Haiku and Cinematic Technique,” *Frogpond* 30:3 (Autumn 2007), 55–64.

5. Burns, *Where the River Goes*, 300.

6. *Ibid.*, 164.



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**David H. Rosen. *Clouds and More Clouds*.** Northfield, MA: Lily Pool Press, 2013, unpaginated (68 pp.), perfect soft-bound, 5.25 x 5.5. ISBN 978-1-628908-0-77. US\$24.95. Available at Amazon.com.

by Robert Epstein, El Cerrito, California

As I’ve gotten older, I’ve become more and more attached to the sun. I shamelessly depend on it. Cloudy or rainy days have a depressing effect on me. Not so for David Rosen, Jungian analyst and author of *The Tao of Jung* as well as *The Tao of Elvis*. He has befriended the clouds and just about everything else. I admire this about David: the older he gets, the more inclusive he has become, with respect to the vicissitudes of nature as well as the vagaries of this human life we are thrown into. The single haibun at the end of *Clouds and More Clouds*, in which the author shares a shocking revelation, informs and colors the haiku that precede it. Above and beyond all the trials and tribulations, the author of *Transforming Depression* is very much at home in the world; it shows in each and every poem in *Clouds*.