

## Reviewed

**Gabriel Rosenstock. Edited by Mícheál Ó hAodha. *Where Light Begins: Haiku*.** Dublin: Original Writing, Ltd., 2012, 116 pp., softbound. ISBN 978-1-908817-47-1. Ebook available at Amazon (US\$7.95) and Barnes & Noble (US\$8.49).

by Rimas Uzgiris, Brooklyn, New York

The greater part of haiku and senryu in this superb collection are rendered in English (some having been published originally in Irish), but there are also some Irish-language haiku paired with the author's own English translations. It may be strange to think of an Irish poet writing haiku—especially in Irish—but we have lived with borrowed forms for a long time now. Why should Irish be any different? Besides, Gabriel Rosenstock is pleased to point out that the ancient scribes of Ireland would often rest from their laborious task of copying the Latin Gospels to pause and look out the window and jot down intense nature lyrics in Old Irish, taking their inspiration from what they could see. Perhaps we may consider Rosenstock the new haiku scribe of Ireland. Whatever we consider him to be in the labyrinths of tradition and categorization, with lines like the following his writing earns our attention:

there must be light  
where they came from—  
chestnut blossoms

We have here the ingredients of great haiku: simple observation, sensitivity to nature, self-effacement, and a merging of the cosmic with the mundane. There is great mystery to the poem as well. On the surface, it could be read as saying nothing more than that the sun makes chestnut trees bloom. Yet, it is saying so much more than that—urging us to see the sublime beauty of existence, the mystery of creation itself.

Formally, Rosenstock can be experimental, but he also shows his mastery of more traditional themes, as in this minimalist poem that plants itself squarely in Zen Buddhist literary soil:

sickle moon—

reaping

emptiness

Rosenstock likes to play with line spacing, not always with equal effectiveness, but more often than not, form and meaning are perfectly tuned:

green green green

the pines

seconds before snow

Even though many poems are animated by the close observation and spiritual response to nature that is so central to Japanese haiku, rarely do we find adherence to the seventeen-syllable rule. In fact, perhaps the only poem that sticks exactly to the traditional syllable count is wildly irreverent in its own way:

ants ants ants ants ants  
antsantsantsantsantsantsants  
ants ants ants ants ants

That's a lot of ants! As we can see from this example, Rosenstock also likes to imbue his nature poems with humor. Often, this humor points to a more cosmic significance, as in the following haiku, where the Buddhist reverence for nothingness is juxtaposed with a bird's bewilderment:

three stabs at nothing!  
the heron shakes its head  
in disbelief

Later in the book, stand-alone haiku give way to sequences, or *rensaku*. Some of these take the form of travelogues, which can produce intriguing juxtapositions, as from this sequence from Kerala, India:

heat shimmers  
an old cyclist  
rides into infinity

scrawny dogs  
on the road before dawn  
going nowhere

Another *rensaku* from islands in Bangaram reveals this philosophical gem:

into a hole in the sand  
something too quick  
to be named

In some *rensaku*, Rosenstock also gives readers a taste of Irish-language haiku, followed by his English translations. Most American readers (like this reviewer) will find the Irish as impenetrable as Japanese, although it is tantalizing to wonder how haiku translated by the author actually work together side by side with his originals. Are they mirror images of one another? Are they in dialogue?

The book concludes with two essays. One is a short afterword by Sasumi Takiguchi, chairman of the World Haiku Club. Takiguchi argues that Rosenstock “is one of the few non-Japanese poets who have a feel for haiku almost instinctively” and that “the haiku root” from which his poetry springs “is fundamentally correct . . . vindicated in the following haiku”:

outside the Guggenheim  
the shape  
of real trees

The final essay is Rosenstock's own appreciation of the poet Issa, whose reputation he seeks to rehabilitate in response to those who consider him "a sentimental, country bumpkin." Rosenstock argues persuasively that we should, instead, valorize Issa's open-hearted compassion. In addition, he thinks we should appreciate the subtlety with which Issa draws the universal out of the seemingly simple and mundane, as in this example:

my favourite cormorant  
the one who surfaces  
with nothing

Indeed, many of Rosenstock's haiku reflect how much he has incorporated Issa's keen eye and compassionate soul into his own work:

blossomless  
but not unloved  
the old magnolia



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