

Bruce Ross. *Spring Clouds: Haiku.* Bangor, Maine: Tancho Press, 2012, unpag., perfect softbound 5.5 x 8.5. ISBN 978-0-9837141-1-8, US\$14.95.

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Bruce Ross's *Spring Clouds* is a collection of 133 haiku with a short preface and a haiga by the author himself. In fact, the collection contains only 132 haiku because one haiku, "my emptiness," appears twice. Some of the haiku, a few as part of haibun, were previously published in haiku journals, newspapers, websites, and newsletters including *Asahi Shimbun*, *Contemporary Haibun*, *Frogpond*, *Haibun Today*, *Modern Haiku*, and *Shamrock*.

To have a thorough understanding or appreciation of this haiku book, a reader needs to read Ross's preface first. Ross, who says he is a "sometime practitioner of T'ai Chi, Reiki, and Zen Buddhist meditation," provides a brief discussion of Bashō's use of *zoka* (nature) in the creative stages of his haiku writing:

[Bashō] moved away from an early mentally constructed poetry of wit, not unlike a more earthy form of English metaphysical poetry, to a renewed aesthetics of depth from medieval Japan, *sabi* (a deep connection with nature), and finally to a simple style of seeming commonplace expression at the end . . .

Ross also cites Bashō's well-known comment on the use of nature, which concludes with the admonition to "follow *zoka* and return to *zoka*." A Zen master himself, Bashō holds with this idea which seems a reflection of the sutra by a Chinese Zen master about the three stages of Zen enlightenment:

Before you study Zen, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers; while you are studying Zen, mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers; but once you have had enlightenment, mountains are once again mountains and rivers again rivers.¹

Applied to haiku writing, the three stages of enlightenment become the three stages of writing apprenticeship. In the first

stage the novice shows interest in haiku for its freshness and uniqueness and fills the 5/7/5 pattern with images that may be just objects; in the second stage the poet, after obtaining some half-knowledge about haiku and writing skills, may write better haiku, but these may lose the naturalness of the original images; in the third stage the poet, with a full awakening into haiku nature, can create haiku with images that present both naturalness and personal insight into nature.

Most poets remain in the second stage because they cannot detach their mind from self. Only those who fully understand the gist or nature of haiku know how to detach their mind and enter into *zoka* so as to reach the realm of naturalness in a seemingly simple style. In other words, they see deeply into nature and their self-nature as well. Thus, what they see into and beyond achieves oneness of self and nature or a unity of life and art. And this unity surely reflects a style of naturalness and lightness in haiku creation.

Ross, a haiku poet influenced by oriental philosophy and Bashō, has gone through this process so thoroughly that he can see more deeply into nature and connect his feelings to nature in his haiku. He understands, as he states in the preface, that haiku writing is “not a mere collection of objects in the world, but a process out of which these objects emerge. . . . This is a truly phenomenological construct based on a poet’s sense of this process, connection to it and to the Tao or the One.” Take, for example, one of Ross’s moon haiku:

from icy branch
down to icy branch
the distant moon

The moon in Chinese and Japanese poetry is an image of loneliness and companionship, as in Li Po’s “Drinking Alone Under the Moon”:

I lift my cup to invite the bright moon
for a party of three with me and my shadow. (Translation mine)

The same sense of loneliness, both the distant moon's and the viewer's, seems to linger in Ross's haiku. The poet chooses a spare view and a plain image to create a distilled haiku moment that alerts the reader to the depths of nature and feeling.

Winter and moon are central images in Ross's collection, which contains at least 34 haiku about winter or moon. The poet, who is especially fascinated with these images, says in the preface, "The moon is endlessly fascinating, compelling our meditation on its changes and uniqueness, a good metaphor for process and mystery. Up in Maine where I live winters and first snow are dramatic events, drawing us into their process. I return to these images, moon and winter, because of their existential impact on my perception." With these words in mind, read the following haiku:

for a moment
all the frogs stopped
bright orange moon

Or this winter haiku using an image of snow:

light snow
falls upon settled snow
a cold morning

This last haiku reminds me of a statement by the English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Advice is like snow: The softer it falls, the longer it dwells upon, and the deeper it sinks into, the mind."²

Ross's fascination with winter reveals other aspects of his sensibility as well:

deep winter night
the oldest tree filled
with stars

This haiku presents a feeling of delight in and a connection to nature, just as the following displays the poet's sensitivity to its tranquil moments:

a bare branch
centered in the full moon
this fine stillness

The poet's sensibility is also presented through his realization of oneness with nature:

I listen more
and become them too
small lake waves

Upon reflection, this haiku also presents all three stages of the poet's involvement with nature: at the beginning he is just a wave-listener; then, in the listening process, he gradually becomes a wave, which indicates a process from self to selflessness. The final stage is an attainment of oneness with nature, which displays the poet's understanding of Tao. As Ross says in the preface, "All things are in the sway of process, ultimately arising from and connected to the Tao or the One which sustain them. The true poet and artist are also in the sway of this process when they do their poetry and art."

A few prominent characteristics of Ross's haiku also deserve attention. One is synesthesia. The poet uses this artistic technique to express his sensibility in an impressive way. For instance,

a sudden tinkling
of the wind bell
winter stars

The stimulation through the auditory image of a tinkling bell evokes the sensation of the visualization of the stars. The following, which bears the title of the collection, is another good example:

the slight clink
of the chime's white disks
spring clouds

This haiku, initially used in a haiga, must be one of the poet's

favorite poems. It presents beautiful sounds pleasant to the ear through the repetition of the vowels “ai” and “i” in each line.

Another characteristic of Ross’s haiku is his simplicity, which reflects the influence of Bashō. For example,

summer solstice
and at its very end
fireflies

The delightful surprise of seeing fireflies is presented through the “simple style of seeming commonplace expression,” as Ross comments on Bashō’s haiku. Another prominent example that shows a trace of Bashō’s influence can be found in

petrified forest
a lone cricket penetrates
the desert

which echoes Bashō’s cicada haiku (閑さや岩にしみ入蝉の声 “shizukasa ya / iwa ni shimiiru / semi no koe”):

How quiet—
locust-shrill
pierces rock.³

Bashō’s haiku focuses on the sound of the cicada that penetrates the rock to deepen the stillness of nature. In the same way, Ross’s cricket penetrates the stillness of desert where the petrified forest, an image of stillness too, deepens such an effect.

To conclude, haiku in *Spring Clouds* capture the impact of moon, clouds, stars, snow, frogs, and fireflies on a unique sensibility. If an assemblage of these images presents beautiful scenes of nature, it also presents the poet’s aesthetic experience in, attitude toward, and fusion with nature. In other words, these images are not beautiful by themselves but through the poet’s understanding of nature and his feeling connected to it or hidden behind it, or through his

visualization that mountains are still mountains. In all, Ross is a poet who knows how to haiku and how to follow nature and return to nature.

Notes

1. Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, 4th ed. Boston: Shambhala, 2000, p. 124.
2. Brian Backman, *Persuasion Points*. Gainesville, FL: Maupin House, 2010, p. 87.
3. Matsuo Bashō, *On Love and Barley: Haiku of Bashō*. Trans and intro. Lucien Stryk. New York: Penguin, 1985, p. 40.



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