

Philip Rowland. *Before Music.* Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2012, 54 pp., perfect softbound, 4.25 x 6.5. ISBN 978-1-936848-19-5. US\$12 from www.redmoonpress.com.

by Dan Schwerin, Greendale, Wisconsin

Philip Rowland is a poet who coaxes us away from the arm-chair, to get outdoors, to convince us that we are not too put-together or grown-up to taste snowflakes with the avant-garde. One of my favorite poems in his second collection, *Before Music*,¹ is a case in point:

snow's
neither
nor

In three words we taste what snow holds: a deliberate rhythm, the downward flow, the unity of the emptying sky, the tapering off, a light music, and a visceral peace. The collection is arranged in five sections of poems that match in form and content, but also invite an appreciation of poetic unity. This poem takes us inside snow's neither/nor. Listen to Rowland, in his own words, from an essay in the August 2009 issue of *Roadrunner*²:

I would also argue that both haiku and surrealist poetry, at their most successful, refer us to the experience of non-duality. That is to say, both enact "the desire to break through boundaries between subject and object . . ."³

This collection invites us to experience the roominess of that non-duality:

the room within the radius of the blind woman's stick

We follow this monostich into the room and feel its space, in one thin-lined poetic harmony. Good poetry, from the back porch of realism, out to the prairie of surrealism, invites a

consideration of the limits of our seeing, the range of our writing, and the reach of its vision.

Elsewhere in his *Roadrunner* essay, Rowland peels the bark off to show us the grain of surreal haiku:

Both haiku and surrealist poetry depend very much upon unexpected juxtapositions of images, or “parallel images,” which . . . are a form of metaphor . . . in all but name.⁴

“The room within the radius,” for example, juxtaposes parallel images like a nest of Russian dolls. Rowland has a gift for disjunction that surprises and stands up to multiple readings. *Before Music* also employs many season words that help ground the leaping in Rowland’s poetry. “Summer rain,” “morning haze,” “daylight moon,” and “dusk” anchor the poems and the collection. Other poems take the reader, the haiku community, and short poetry to the edges of the radius we can reach in language. As a reader, I do not imagine myself so put-together that I cannot reach for a dictionary or search engine when a good poem calls for it. I was glad to be rewarded by the effort:

anchor

i

tic

Just to save you a trip to the dictionary, an anchorite is a person who has retired to a solitary place for a life of religious seclusion.⁵ Language poetry that can explore the anchor for the small I, and the small I at the center of what is anchoritic, treats the reader who makes this excursion into non-duality. I will venture, too, that while Rowland took me to surrealistic heights, at times I also felt dropped off at the esoteric:

negotiating the quake
investing in smeared
leaves

If, in general, surrealist poetry wants to take us past what is known,⁶ and African surrealists differ from Europeans by means of taking us not just to the unconscious, but farther, into the mystical,⁷ I sense Rowland's poetry leading us down these same long corridors. Reading the poem, I sense the quake. I sense smeared leaves are preservation against decay. Perhaps the reader is led to the folly of putting weight on wet leaves. Yet, if any more than this was signified or was covered in Poetry 101, I was sick that day. If you grant that surrealist poetry aims for non-sense insofar as it reaches for what is more than rational, a poem like "negotiating the quake" hurls us into the exciting orbit of surrealism. My reading could be flawed, of course, and I appreciate poetry that risks, but one feature I love about haiku, and would hate to lose, is its democracy. Haiku are richly complex but still accessible. With that said, *Before Music* leaves me appreciating a writer who leads us to these tensions.

Rowland's essay helps explain the different sets of expectations that construct the surrealist and the haiku enterprise:

Where the surrealist poem tends to foreground, or frame, its images, as if to make it clear that these are "just images," haiku presents them more simply and directly, "unframed," possibly with a stronger implication of authorial sincerity.⁸

Rowland takes us to the play of both sets of images—thus framed and unframed—offering the haiku community new neuro-pathways.

What is beautiful in this collection is a language so spare that it borders on signage. The multiple disjunctions shimmer like holograms. There is a hint of jazz, too:

in the hush before music
the music of who
I am not

What this poet does especially well is take us out to the edge of consciousness where the first notes of music register. His

choice of everyday images, such as water or islands, made me nostalgic for the Wisconsin objectivist, Lorine Niedecker, even if the reach of this work made me search for my Cid Corman decoder ring. A collection like this, that calls Cid Corman to mind, reminds us of a poet who was associated with the Beats, the Black Mountain poets, and Objectivists, but also independent of them.

In addition, I am delighted when haiku make me think of Robert Spiess, an early editor of *Modern Haiku* and grandfather of the haiku form in English. Rowland's poem:

sky wires so wires blue wires

had me recalling Spiess' poem from *The Heron's Legs* (1966):

old posts and old wire
hold wild grape vines holding
old posts and old wire⁹

When all is said and done, the significance of this collection is more than the content of the poems that leap off two feet into non-duality. *Before Music* knocks out the wall between the rooms of haiku definition and haiku practice. The poems take us out of our polarities into a broader vision of haiku—through and beyond words, and smeared leaves—past our easy fundamentalisms to reaches where poems can play and mean and move.

morning after—
the mountain comes
to the leaf

Notes

1. For additional critical review see Scott Metz, "Before Music by Philip Rowland." Retrieved April 16 (posted January 25) 2013, from the *Roadrunner* haiku blog, www.roadrunnerhaikublog.wordpress.com.

2. Philip Rowland, "Surrealism & Contemporary Haiku," *Roadrunner* IX:3 (August 2009), p. 5.
3. Rowland quotes Edward R. Germain, ed., *Surrealist Poetry in English*. London: Penguin Books, 1978, p. 44.
4. Rowland, "Surrealism," p. 3.
5. *Random House Dictionary*, unabridged, 2013. Retrieved, April 16, 2013, www.dictionary.com.
6. Kenneth Koch, *Making Your Own Days*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998, p. 56.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 280.
8. Rowland, "Surrealism," p. 3.
9. Robert Spiess, *The Heron's Legs*. Platteville, WI: American Haiku, 1966.



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