

Reviewed by Allyson Whipple

Our Backs to the Wind: Selected Haiku of Gary Hotham by Gary Hotham (Brooks Books, 2025). 128 pages, 6" x 9". Clothbound. ISBN 978-1-929820-25-1. \$30.00 from brooksbookshaiku.com and other booksellers.

Our Backs to the Wind is a comprehensive volume of Gary Hotham's haiku selected from collections that appeared between 1976 and 2023. He is a driving force in English-language haiku appearing in prestigious publications longer than some of us who fall into the "younger poets" category have been alive. This collection shows readers the full scope of his career, and as the only substantive overview of his entire career, is worthwhile reading for loyal fans and newer readers alike.

Our Backs to the Wind opens on a critical introduction by Brad Bennett. For those of us newer to the English-language haiku scene, who maybe only know the previous decade or so of Gary's work, Brad's introduction is an excellent way to get a sense of the themes and aesthetics that Gary consistently turns to in his work.

If you are familiar with Gary's work, *Our Backs to the Wind* is an excellent opportunity to reconnect with his poetry and revisit some established favorites. For people who are newer to his work or to English-language haiku in general, this book is fantastic for encountering new favorites. For example, I had the pleasure of reading this 1993 senryu for the first time:

her comb on the table
the space
a broken tooth makes

What I love about this poem is the way that it echoes Buson's haunting poem:

piercingly cold
 stepping on my dead wife's comb
 in the bedroom

(Trans. Haruo Shirane)

Knowing the depth of Gary's haiku knowledge I am certain that this poem is a direct allusion to Buson, but even if it isn't, the poem stands on its own, and my belief that there is a connection yields a satisfying reading experience.

One of the things I most enjoyed about reading these poems was having the chance to see how Gary's approach to haiku has evolved over time. For example, I've only been in the haiku world long enough to know of Gary as a poet who writes center-aligned poems. This collection shows me, though, that while he never avoided that form earlier, it didn't become a consistent feature of his work until around 2013. By the end of this book, I really felt that I had come to know Gary as a poet.

After journeying through Gary Hotham's haiku career, the book closes with his afterword. This is the perfect way to end the collection. We started with Brad Bennett's perspective, and we get to conclude with Gary's reflections on his long and fulfilling haiku life. The back matter also contains a thorough bibliography, plus a reprint of his 1999 essay "Why Haiku?," which should be essential reading for any beginner.

I recommend *Our Backs to the Wind* as a comprehensive study of Gary Hotham's work. Those looking to better understand the world of English-language haiku, especially American haiku, would do well to read this book. While those who have always appreciated Gary's work will certainly enjoy it, I recommend it most for those looking to gain insight into the broader poetic life of one of our community's major contributors.