

Lew Watts interviewed by Caroline Skanne, in Blithe Spirit, 31.4, 2021

First of all, and before we get to poetry, tell us a little about yourself. What are a few things that people may not know about you?

I'm originally from Cardiff, but I now live in Chicago with my wife, Roxanne. Passions? My family, of course, as well as fly fishing (anywhere, anytime), jazz guitar, rugby, and gin martinis. What people may not know is that I once chaired the World Bank's external expert panel on climate change, and I have an honorary doctorate from Bristol University.

You came to Japanese-form poetry after many years writing longer forms. How did that happen?

In early 2010, I was finishing a poetry collection around the experience of learning to dance tango. I was using form to match the dance—some free verse, but a lot of villanelles, rondeaus, and triolets—so I had written a sequence of short poems to capture key moments in a *milonga*, or formal tango dance. They felt like haiku, but I wasn't sure. Luckily for me, Charlie Trumbull, then the editor of *Modern Haiku*, lived close by, and so I called and we had the first of many coffees.

When I showed Charlie my sequence, he immediately started editing with a pencil, talking me through his thoughts as he went along. He also gave me a copy of *Modern Haiku*, which I devoured when I got home. A few coffees later, I showed him a re-written *milonga* sequence, and he was devastated—"You've edited the soul out of it," he said. I protested that I'd only done what I thought he'd suggested, but I agreed to go away and tweak it back toward my original. That sequence of 14 haiku was published in the next issue of *Modern Haiku*.

Charlie has been my mentor ever since. More recently, he and I have started writing together, initially linked haibun, and for the last two years renga. He tolerates some of my crazy ideas (and verses!), and I take great pleasure in teasing his more academic side.

You're increasingly becoming known as a haibun poet. How & why did you begin to write haibun?

I wrote and published my first haibun in 2011. After that, I didn't think about the form until the day I visited Lee Gurga at his home in Illinois. We talked haiku for several hours until Lee suddenly asked me a surprising question—“Can all people in Wales sing?” I replied that all Welsh people can indeed sing, though not always well! But everyone can sing in harmony. Lee's eyes opened wide, and he asked me why.

The answer became the haibun “Welsh Harmony” that appeared in *Frogpond* in 2013. It's since been widely anthologised, and I still think it's one of my better works.

What sustains your interest in this form?

If a haiku captures a moment, a haibun can capture an experience. I find this incredibly powerful, particularly when those experiences are strong or complex. I'm fortunate that I've lived and worked in many countries and have some unusual experiences to draw on. I am less fortunate that my childhood was full of trauma, yet I have found ways to write about some of those times. Key, for me, is the need to stay concise, to say as little as possible and, as with haiku, leave space for the reader.

Do you have any influences?

When I started writing haibun, I read everything I could be the late Ken Jones. But I think the strongest influence on my work has been Roberta Beary. Her haibun are always wonderful, but her greatest contribution to me has been as haibun editor of *Modern Haiku*. There is something thrilling about receiving an email from her that begins “I'm interested in your haibun . . .,” knowing that you're about to engage with a superb editor, that if you listen and respond you will end up with a much better poem. Nowadays, Roberta may text me, and we often speak by phone because we have become friends. I guess that's another piece of advice I'd give, that if an editor asks if you're open to working together on a submitted haibun, grasp it. That's what I did a few years ago with Rich Youmans at *Contemporary Haibun Online (cho)*,

and he has helped enormously on some difficult poems. To Roberta, to Rich, and to all the other editors over the years, I'd like to say thank you.

**As one of two haibun editors of *frogpond*, what do you look for in a haibun?
Any potential pitfalls writers should be aware of?**

I always write my haibun's title last, yet it's the first thing I see in a submission. I want a title that draws me in, but that doesn't telegraph what's to come. The best titles create an "aha" moment *after* the haibun has been read. For the prose, I want to feel the poet owns it, that there is truth and/or authenticity behind the words. Let me hear repeated sounds and sense the rhythms. Vary the sentence lengths and structures to make me sigh or gasp. But most of all, force me to say "Wow!" repeatedly. And for the haiku, aim for the very best, poems that can shine and stand alone but that, when combined with the prose, are able to leap and open up new lines of insight.

Any further tips for haibun writers?

I'm often asked how I know when that leap is just right. Well, I don't, at least not always (ask Roberta!). For most people, I think it's easier to know when the leap is too small, when the haiku simply continues, or even repeats, the theme of the prose. But I have a personal trick to tell if the leap is too large, and that's by using the title. I believe a good title should somehow link yet shift from both the prose and the haiku—completing the triangle, so to speak. If you can't come up with a title that does that, it's a sign the haiku has leapt too far, that you have lost the prose . . . and probably the reader.

On your own writing, what has haibun as an art form done for *you*?

Like I said, I had a traumatic childhood that for many years I suppressed. When I first allowed myself to write of those experiences, it was like a soft release. I still held back, however, and I like to think the prose benefitted from that. But the real release occurred when a haiku appeared from my deep subconscious. I remember staring at it, wanting to bury it, but it was too late. Some people describe haibun as representing or describing an

epiphany, and they usually mean the prose. In my haibun-of-release, however, the epiphany for was in the emergence of the haiku. I have recently written about this *cho* (vol. 17.3).

Your wonderful novel, *Marcel Malone*, is about a psychotherapist who uses poetry to unlock a patient's past, and then has to face her own. Not only is it poetry-themed, but it also has the title character writing haiku! How did the book come about, and how has it been received?

A very close friend, a psychotherapist, once told me of an unusual approach to treatment, and I thought I could build a story around it. I decided that I would write as the psychotherapist, and I spent a long time sketching out her character and that of her patient, Marcel. The more I worked on Marcel, however, the more I realized he had to be a failing poet. Why does the therapist suggest Marcel text haiku to her? To get him to slow down, to live in the moment, to capture and share those rare sparks in his daily life. I loved writing the novel, and thankfully it's done well. It went into a second print run early on.

Where do you see haibun going in the future?

I would love to see more experimentation, including the creation of hybrid haibun built around conventional poetic forms—you, Caroline, were kind enough to publish one in the last issue of *Hedgerow* centred around a *terza rima*. Yet even “classical” haibun of prose-plus-haiku are increasingly appearing in some of the mainline poetry journals. I personally think it's only a matter of time before the wider poetry community wakes up to the form. I have always been a great admirer of prose poetry (if you haven't read *Seeing Stars* by Simon Armitage, do so), but most prose poems now seem bare without a haiku, as though they're missing the chance of an additional spark, of that visceral leap and the space it creates for the reader.

Where can we find your work, and do you have recommendations on key haibun resources?

Well, the second question is easy—go to the Resources section of *Contemporary Haibun Online's* website. And then find and read as much

haibun as you can. As for my work, I have a selection on my website, www.lewwatts.com, and you can access my collection *Tick-Tock* for free at Snapshot Press—in fact, I have a more extensive collection of haibun and haiku coming out from Snapshot Press in the near future.