

An interview with Gail Sher
by Robert D. Wilson

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RDW: In the Preface of one of Gail Sher's many books, *The Haiku Master*, Andrew Shelling writes:

“In the annals of haiku, Gail Sher's *The Haiku Masters* is unique. There exist many volumes on how to write and teach haiku. Dozens of fine translations of Japanese poets can be had in English. Until now, though, nobody has thought to write an original book on the four master poets – a book that recounts their biographies (or autobiographies) in the rhythmic interplay of prose and verse known as haibun. Gail's diary – like chapters follow the arduous search of each poet, her own poems responding to their hard won spiritual and poetic insights. When I link those two terms – poetic and spiritual – it is a move all four poets would understand in a flash. Haiku – the best of it – conveys a flash of Satori, and this is its enduring legacy.”

RDW: What is your definition as a Zen Buddhist of the creative process? Does the process conflict with your spirituality? American Zen Buddhist, Anne Cushman, called the creative process in a recent issue of the online Zen journal, *Tri-cycle*:

“. . . wild, naked, unpredictable, uncontrollable and sometimes inappropriate. Our subconscious minds are cerebral journeys into the darkness we call stored memory; the inner reaches of when, where, and what we remember and interpret, without rules: a free fall into a dimension we know little or nothing about.”

GS: Robert, it is too big a question for me. My mind doesn't really work in generalities. So I'm going to answer a slightly different question, addressing what, for me, is the heart of my relationship with writing which is about being blessed (making myself available for this) by moments of pure awareness.

RDW: When and why in your journey as a Zen Buddhist did you decide to write a book on whom most scholars consider the four top haiku masters of haiku: Basho, Issa, Buson, and Shiki?

GS: I was intensely moved by the level of pain each one of them suffered and that despite this (or perhaps because of it) they managed to achieve such a refinement of concentration and elegance in their craft.

I didn't write these diaries simultaneously. This book took years to bring to completion. I thoroughly immersed myself in one writer's life, reading extensively both his work and what I could find about his story. Then I integrated it and wrote from the integration.

Only later did I move on to apply the same process to another writer. In this respect it is different from a novel.

RDW: As a follow up question, how does Zen relate to the thinking that forms a haiku, overtly or covertly, whether or not the poet has any connection to Buddhism?

GS: The connection between Zen and haiku is presence.

RDW: I like the way you illustrate, in your book, writing in “the rhythmic interplay of prose and verse” called haibun, the meaning of what for many is a complex term, using a minimal amount of words coupled with the unsaid, as if writing in a diary like Basho did, the meaning of and how to use a term such as you do here in your seeming simple description of a “pillow word.”

*Makura Kotaba: Pillow Word:
Its Double Entendre*

*a flash of lightning;
through the darkness goes
the cry of a night heron*

*inazuma ya
yami no kata yuku
go'i no koe*

Late in life, during a visit to my native village, Iga, I am lying, comfortably suspended in the magnetic silence of an oncoming autumn storm, when suddenly lightning flashes. Through the darkness that returns, a night heron screams.

A night heron not only has a terrifying voice but lustrous wings that glow in the dark. The flash of lightning, plus this bird with its weird and ghastly scream, create an eerie beauty.

The “pillow word?” Since go'i, the name of the night heron, is identical in pronunciation and ideograph to Go'i (The Five Modes) of Tung-shan, these are present as a shadow.

*August moon
In its depths tonight
the sound of flowers*

Please elucidate on your reference to the five modes of Tung Shan, and the shadow the pronunciation of go'I and Go'I form for you in your mind?

GS: Think of “pillow word” as a dream, present as a shadow both before and after the time of the dream. Sound impacts the energy body which bypasses mind. So all aspects of two words that sound the same must per force be present in the body, though not necessarily consciously, when one of them is pronounced.

RDW: I've read, of course, other definitions of the term, "pillow word," but your use of a minimal amount of words to say what many say in a lot of words to define this term and make sense of its usage, remind me of haiku. Is this intentional?

GS: No. My spare language derives from the principle of saturation—to "pack" a word with as much energy and meaning as it will hold—"stuff" it almost to bursting. What with all the "talking on paper" today standing in for "writing," I fear, as a culture, this concept risks becoming anachronistic. Still, it's the way to get the most "bang for your bucks," so-to-speak, language-wise.

RDW: In part one of your book, *The Haiku Masters*, Basho: Epoch of Dusk, you as or with Basho write:

"*Hokku* should not spell everything out. What remains unexpressed is rooted in its beauty's source, deeper than human understanding. Dawn melts into light, pale clouds rise, picking herbs a young girl yawns."

You are obviously saying here that it's unwise to "tell all" in a haiku. Would you go into this a little deeper?

GS: Writing needs space. We don't want to suffocate a reader, i.e., push them out of the writing, just as, with a guest, we wouldn't invite one to a space lacking room for comfort. Space helps reading become an interior creative experience.

RDW: When you write about any one of the four haiku masters, the two of you merge as single entity, which to most in the non-metaphysical world of Western thought, is impossible for another to travel beyond their own illusion of interpretation into another's person's head space. Your writing, however, counters this kind of thinking. Your responsive haiku, your writing as if you are one of the poets, would seem absurd if this were not so. Help us to understand this process, Gail. Writing in such a manner would be considered risky by most, yet for you it's a stream of consciousness, without walls, boundaries or roadmaps; a path you walk down without preconditioned Buson-esque thought.

GS: Fortunately, even Christ knew about empathy. Empathy makes it possible for one person to experience approximately what another has experienced without experiencing it herself. It might help you to know that I am a psychotherapist by profession and that I spent my entire reading life focused on biography and autobiography to the point of exhausting the genre.

RDW: Buson was an artist and poet, whose haiku, though complex, looks simple on paper, yet he was a master of ma (white space as a western painter might call it, or "dreaming room" as my friend, Publisher and poet, Denis Garrison calls it).

How can you become one day Buson, and on another day, Basho, and so forth? It reminds me of when I was writing my novel, *Late for Mass*. I had to literally become each character in order to give reality and breath to my story. Is this process the same for you?

GS: Nothing could be more natural for me than entering into another's story. Also, this isn't a court of law. What's required is emotional accuracy, which stems from a different source than literal accuracy. In this I happened to be highly trained.

RDW: When writing with and as Buson, you refer to a section of his *haibun*, *New Flower Picking* (Shin Hanatsumi), written in 1777, where he talks about his encounter with a badger, and again in your own style, paraphrase and iterate what he said using less words, and instead of using his poetry, you insert your own, which at first seems bold, but it works. You have become Buson and are seeing through his eyes:

First I stay with Jou whose villa is covered by trees and overgrown with grass. One autumn night while his old caretaker idles away the evening, Buddhist rosary in hand, I am in a back room struggling to compose hokku. After a while I pull a quilt over me and as I'm beginning to doze off, I hear loud banging sounds on the storm doors enclosing the veranda. There are twenty or thirty bangs and my heart is pounding fast, but when I get up to look, no one is there. I go back to bed. The same thing happens again. Utterly unnerved, I ask the caretaker about it.

*"it's father!" cries the son
spotting in some branches
an imperceptible breeze*

"It's a badger. Next time he comes, you chase him away. I'll go out the back, hide behind a hedge and wait for him." Before long the bangs start. "There he is!" I open the door. With a cry the old man dashes out. But there's not a soul in sight. This same incident occurs for four consecutive nights. Just as I'm feeling too exhausted to stay in the villa, Jou's head servant comes to see us. "Early this morning, a villager killed an old badger at a place called Yabushita," he says. "I'm sure he is the one playing tricks on you. Please have a restful sleep tonight."

*late winter night—
on the kettle hanger paused
I see it seeing me see*

Sure enough, the badger doesn't come. But I feel sorry for the animal. I don't like what he has done to me, but then again, he is a visitor who has come to console this lonely traveler sleeping away from home. Perhaps he and I have karmic ties. I am so grief-stricken that I give alms to a mendicant friar called Zenku and ask him to offer prayers for the badger's soul.

white sails chase

*the passing sound of rain—
below the waves, one trailed cloud-scrap*

RDW: Again, embodying Buson, you write:

"The poet should not deliberately try to write a poem. He is to wait until his mind reaches the state most susceptible to poetic creation. When that state arrives, he should start composing with his eyes closed, since the verse is to mirror the landscape he sees in his mind's eye. The composition has to be done in the presence of past masters, because haikai is a traditional verse form. The masters will disappear as soon as the creative process is over. All that is left will be a poetic paradise that is the poet's own.

*from a mountain bird
a mountain song—
piercing the blustery wind"*

You state that in Buson's mindset (is this your mindset as well?) that haikai [haiku] "is a traditional verse form." What is your interpretation of this statement? Do you feel that English and Japanese haiku are two completely different genres, since the West has kicked the traditional out of the ballpark, deviating from the S/L/S metric schemata, are confused as to the difference between haiku and senryu, and some saying there is no need for kigo?

GS: Yes. I was so moved by Buson's statement because it precisely matches my experience. English and Japanese obviously have entirely different syllabic structures so counting syllables (which pertains to Japanese syllables) seems like following the letter of the law rather than the spirit, for an English poet. I don't exactly see them as two completely different genres because the essence is the same. A haiku is a moment of presence no matter what language you're expressing it in. That, not the number of syllables, is the important point.

RDW: I could go on in this interview about your insight into Issa and Shiki, but we aren't writing a book. Perhaps you'd grant me an additional interview to explore Issa, Shiki, and your own beliefs and insight into aesthetics, Chinese and Japanese, and the influence Chinese poetry had had on Japanese poetry.

GS: Yes, we could do another interview if my somewhat pithy replies suit your purposes.

RDW: It's a known fact that Haiku was influenced by more than one belief system in Japan: Daoism, Confucianism, Shinto, Zen Buddhism, other forms of Buddhism, and the indigenous animistic beliefs of the ancient Ainu. At the end of your section on Basho, in your final entry on Basho, you title it:

Zen is Poetry. Poetry, Zen

Are you painting a concrete image here or does your usage of the term ZEN have a universal meaning: it is and it isn't; what will, will . . . haiku being a journey into an individual's mind, karma, and heart; always changing, the Zen learning to accept and without want?

GS: Secretly I think the word "Zen" today is a buzz word. I've even seen it used commercially as reflecting a kind of "in." No one really knows what it means because it refers to Mind being No Thing. So here, I'm just "going with the flow."

RDW: Thank you, Gail, for taking time out to answer these questions. I look forward to the continuance of this interview in our Winter issue.

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