

robert lowes

HAIKU SOCIETY: AN INTERVIEW WITH BEN GAA



BEN GAA, A HAIKU POET, RINGS A PAIR OF HAND BELLS at readings between each of his poems. Besides helping listeners catch their mental breaths, the chiming reinforces the spell that Gaa casts with his words:

twilight
losing sight
of the wiffle ball

midnight
not hearing the silence
until the owl

spring afternoon
picking the garden
from my fingernails

The St. Louisan bills himself as “your friendly neighborhood haiku poet.” With his shaggy beard, shoulder-length hair, and smile, Gaa indeed comes across as approachable, accessible — virtues of not only haiku, but also of a haiku ambassador like Gaa. Besides writing enough haiku to fill three chapbooks and two collections (*One Breath* is the latest), and giving readings, he conducts workshops and teaches on a YouTube channel of his called Haiku Talk.

He’s on a mission, because haiku needs an ambassador to clear up some misconceptions. The best of English-language haiku doesn’t follow the three-line, 5-7-5 syllable format that arose in Japan and still gets taught to grade-schoolers here. In the first place, Japanese has a different system of sound units than English; a single consonant can get counted in Japanese haiku. More importantly, haiku in any language isn’t about just getting the count right, which invites doggerel. Instead, as the Haiku Society of America states, a haiku is “a short poem that uses imagistic language to convey the essence of an experience of nature or the season instinctively linked to the human condition.” It’s all about a moment in time. A haiku moment, as

Gaa would say, of sudden insight. (You also can have a senryu moment, a senryu being identical to a haiku except that it explores human nature).

As an import to Western literature, Japanese haiku has exerted far-reaching influence. The form helped shaped the image-making of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams and later the Beat poets. Novelist Richard Wright of *Native Son* fame wrote thousands of haiku shortly before his death, and notable poets like Billy Collins and Paul Muldoon have tried their hand at it. Yet most literary journals (*december* is an exception, having published Gaa's work) don't feature haiku, perhaps reflecting a sentiment that he heard from an editor: "Why would you waste your time with this? It's not worth anything. Nobody's going to publish it."

Given such an unwelcome mat, it's not surprising that haikuists have created their own societies, journals, and contests. While the world of haiku can seem insular, it's also an international phenomenon, exemplified by anthologies with bylines from India, Denmark, Nigeria and Saudi Arabia.

Gaa entered haiku society rather casually. A creative-writing graduate of Knox College, he has written, directed, and acted in plays, shed fake blood in horror movies, but has always thought of himself as a poet first. Publication success eluded him when he was writing Western-style poems. When he Googled journals that would allow online submissions and relieve him of stamp-licking, two haiku journals popped up — *Acorn* and *The Heron's Nest*. Gaa submitted some early attempts at haiku, only to get rejected. The editor of *The Heron's Nest* prescribed him a reading list to learn the craft from modern masters such as Jim Kacian and Nicholas Virgilio as well as old masters like Basho and Buson.

Gaa proceeded to read haiku, write haiku, suffer rejection, read more, write more, submit more, and suffer more rejection. Then he scored his first acceptance in 2010.

anniversary
an old dress on the line
fills with wind

"I was hooked," says Gaa. "I said, 'Right on. This is it.'"

With 1,000 published haiku to his credit, Gaa now has opportunities galore to ring his hand bells. He talked about the bells — and much more — in an interview with *december*.

—Robert Lowes

DECEMBER: How did you come up with the bells for your readings?

GAA: Early on, I had to figure out how to do this on stage. How do I read these poems? Because they don't have titles and you don't explain what they are.

DECEMBER: You don't have the usual introductions, such as "I wrote this poem after my vacation in Alaska..." which could be longer than the haiku.

GAA: Exactly. That was a problem I had to solve. A couple of things popped into my head. I remember sitting in school and having slide-show presentations. After each slide, there'd be a ding. I was raised Catholic and I was an altar boy who would ring the bells when certain things were happening, like the blessing of the bread and wine. I thought a bell might be an interesting thing to try with haiku.

DECEMBER: They're not ceremonial Japanese bells then.

GAA: That's not how I came to it. The bell was just a way to make these (haiku) stand out. I tell the audience, "I will ring the bell three times to start the reading, and then poem, a chime; poem, a chime; and at the end, I will ring the bell three times so you know it's done." When I do that, the audience quiets down. They relax to the rhythm of the bells. They know after the bell a new poem is coming.

DECEMBER: When did you start writing poetry?

GAA: I started making books when I was four. I dictated my first book to my mom. It was a dinosaur book. I drew the pictures. I still have a copy. I did a lot of fiction writing in grade school. My 4th grade teacher let me read my stories to the class. But it wasn't until eighth grade that the poetry bug took over.

DECEMBER: Were there any poets back then who inspired you?

GAA: It wasn't poets; it was song lyrics. Around eighth grade, I got into metal. Metallica was a big band of mine. They had a lot of instrumental pieces and I found myself writing my own lyrics to them. I'd write things to the beats, to the intensity of

what I was listening to. The more I listened to song lyrics, the more avenues I started to explore. In high school you had Whitman, Dickinson, and William Carlos Williams in the textbooks and I thought, “Wow, there are poets. This is what they do. Maybe that’s what I can do.”

DECEMBER: How would you compare the experience of writing haiku to writing other kinds of poems?

GAA: One problem I had with free verse was that I seemed to have an ear for language and came up with some great lines and phrases, but I had no focus. No focus at all. I couldn’t tell you why I wrote a line a certain way other than it sounded good.

And with free verse and other kinds of poetry, a lot of it comes from personal experience. You want to tell your truth, or somebody else’s. People look to poets and artists to a certain degree in the West to see their vision. But with haiku, if I’m doing my job, you don’t see me. So I had a hard time figuring out what I wanted to write about, when I was writing other types of poems.

With haiku, I never worry about what I’m going to write about. It comes from everything around me, because it’s not about my personal experience. It’s about finding a common moment and using tools to put that moment together so that when readers enter the poem, they bring their life experience with them, and they see it as their experience.

DECEMBER: How many haiku do you write per month?

GAA: On average, I come up with 30 to 35 that are submittable. On top of that, there are a bunch that I would never show anybody.

DECEMBER: You’ve said haiku has given you a new way of experiencing life. Would you talk about that?

GAA: Haiku made it okay to pay attention. Here’s an example. In South St. Louis, for

seven or eight years before I started to do this, I didn't know what kinds of birds were in my backyard. Possums — I wasn't aware of them because I wasn't looking. I never noticed that buzzards would fly along the River Des Peres. They would come up from the Mississippi River to the River Des Peres twice a day.

DECEMBER: Some haiku poets view their writing as a way to practice Zen Buddhism. Do you?

GAA: I do not. I don't disagree with people who make those connections. They make sense. Haiku doesn't talk about the beginning or the end, the future or the past. It's about now. That's where the Zen connection comes into play.

But I don't think you need to go there to write haiku. People who have different faiths write in this form. I know that based on what countries haiku poets are writing from. They don't all come from the Japanese Zen tradition. There are haiku journals in India and Pakistan.

Beginning writers often try to write Japanese-flavored things. I disagree with that. Basho would disagree with that. You're not paying attention to where you live. If Basho were alive today, he'd say, "Don't talk about Mount Fuji. Talk about the Mississippi River."

DECEMBER: Is there a Japanese master that you especially appreciate?

GAA: In college, when I was reading (the anthology) *The Essential Haiku*, Buson had a poem in there that continues to floor me.

I go
you stay
two autumns

Six words. If I can write something like that someday, I'd be extremely happy.

DECEMBER: Who are some of your favorite English-language haikuists?

GAA: Two come to mind. John Stevenson, I like his concise language. And Carolyn Hall. She's able to deal with connections between humans in an amazing way. Here's one of hers:

frost moon
I tell my daughter
the truth

Ah. So good.

DECEMBER: The frost moon must be associated with fall.

GAA: Yeah. The frost moon colors the meaning of the phrase "I tell my daughter/the truth." Suddenly this thing you're going to tell is cold. It's hard. That's where the juxtaposition of the two images comes together and pops, and gives you that haiku moment.

Carolyn never tells you what (the truth) means. We interpret that ourselves. I don't have a daughter. But everybody's been in that situation where you tell someone you love a hard truth.

DECEMBER: What's your writing routine like?

GAA: I need some place where I'm sitting (laughs), and I have to have a stack of books. Whether it's the latest issues of journals, anthologies, or full-length collections, I start with reading. What that does, it quiets my mind. It gets me out of my head and allows me to get into the pace of haiku and senryu. And before long, the rest of the world — my phone — quiets, and suddenly, maybe it's something in a poem that triggers my attention, or something around me that catches my senses, and I get a line or a couple of words, or a feeling, and I start writing in my sketchbook. So whether it's my reading chair here, or a pub like McGurk's, or a bench at the Missouri Botanical Garden, or a coffee house, yeah, those are places I go. I have a portable hammock that I take to Lafayette Square Park on weekends. I'll sit for a couple of hours just reading and writing.

DECEMBER: How much time do you spend on revision?

GAA: Depends on the poem. Some have taken years to get right. Sometimes you get lucky and the poem gets birthed the first time you put it on the page. It's perfect.

DECEMBER: What's on your mind when you revise?

GAA: Sometimes it's the musicality. Are there internal rhymes? Is there alliteration? How do the syllable stresses fall?

Does the opening line provide enough of a hook and entice the reader to keep reading, or is it flat? I teach that using one of my haiku. It goes

a little frog
on our sundial
passing time

The first line initially was "a frog." That version got passed over by a number of journals. I kept trying to figure out why. The reality was even though lines two and three were pretty good, the opening line was flat. So I added the word "little." A little frog. Suddenly, that frog is interesting. Suddenly, your eyes twinkle when you think about that little frog. So I look for the right amount of detail, just enough to bring the reader into the moment and make sure they can see something.

DECEMBER: I don't associate haiku with musicality, at least in the way that Western poetry is associated with musicality — rhyme, meter, repetition, alliteration, and so on. I relate haiku more to silence. Would you talk about that?

GAA: I don't disagree with you that haiku and senryu in general don't come from a musical background. This is more a peculiarity to my own writing. That's where I started from — writing to music.

DECEMBER: Right. Writing to Metallica.

GAA: Exactly. That's something that's carried with me through my own work. If you look at it, you'll see things like internal rhyme. There's a rhythm to my poems that you might not find in other haiku poets.

The other thing — with any kind of art, you don't want people to see what tricks you're using. When you have a small poem and you use a lot of Western techniques, they come across as being very obvious.

DECEMBER: Too much technique stands out.

GAA: Yeah. That's why it's very obvious when you're writing in a 5-7-5 syllable format. You spot it a mile away because people are padding it to hit the syllable count and they're forgetting anything else that goes into making a haiku a haiku. You can certainly write a 5-7-5 haiku, but you have to do it so people aren't automatically drawn to counting syllables.

DECEMBER: Right.

GAA: Most of us don't do that anymore, because the focus is not that, it's compression, it's the tension between images, the juxtaposition of images, it's being in the moment unfolding in real time and taking a reader into this experience that we share collectively as humans on this planet.

DECEMBER: Some poets occasionally write in haiku. You write nothing but haiku. What accounts for your dedication to the form?

GAA: Most of the poets whom I know in the haiku community write in other forms, even if it's just other forms of Eastern verse. I'm kind of an oddball, writing only haiku and senryu. I found out what would work for me. I wanted to get really good at something. That's my hyperfocus. I'm continually learning about this form. I'm not bored with it. As soon as I get bored, I'll move on to other things. I can appreciate longer-form poetry, but I'm not drawn to it. The world is saying, "You have to do other stuff." For me, this is what I'm doing until I decide I don't want to do it anymore.

DECEMBER: Do you find haiku writers among historically marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ community, or peoples of color? What's the diversity like?

GAA: I think there are people of those demographics working within the form, but the form itself deals with things that we share in common as humans. The form dictates that you're not looking for personal experience in your own life. That can be present, but it's got to be at a more human level, because we all have pressure points, we all feel like we're oppressed in some way, we all feel like things are stacked against us sometimes, we all have things we celebrate. We all have things we lose, we all have complicated relationships, and those are the things that come to the forefront in haiku, as well as strictly observing the natural surroundings. And despite the horror in the world, these things (in nature) still exist and allow us to find beauty, to connect to something beyond the conflict at hand. I see haiku not so much as a way to engage in the conflict at hand, but to look beyond it to tomorrow. I know we're in hardship now, but that moon...look at that moon!

DECEMBER: Can haiku engage with subjects like genocide?

GAA: They do, but they do it one moment at a time. There are many, many haiku written about the atomic bombs dropped on Japan, from the Japanese perspective, from global perspectives.

The other thing is that haiku generally don't push a political agenda. They're not preachy. They're not telling you to see things in a certain way, because that's the right way. They're expressing a moment.

DECEMBER: I noticed that some of your haiku reflects on societal upheaval.

restless night
the clarity of the riot
in HDTV.

This took me back to seeing the Ferguson riots on TV.

GAA: Well, that's when I wrote it. You and I live here, so that's what makes sense to us. If you lived in Seattle, you'd have a different riot in mind.

DECEMBER: Here's another:

election sermon
the way stained glass
bends the light.

It struck me as a poke at sermons that distort religion for the sake of politics.

GAA: Certainly a valid reading of it. Another person might say, "This is a real long sermon. I'm looking at anything else around the church — oh, look at the stained glass windows." If I have experienced sexual abuse by a priest, it could be a completely different poem.

DECEMBER: Does the brevity of haiku discourage literary journals from publishing it?

GAA: Good question. Most mainstream journals, are they going to put one little haiku on a page? Come on. Editors don't like having all that white space. They want to fill those pages with words.

The other thing is, there is still very negative thought around haiku. Most people think it's very childish, a waste of time. But I had a painting professor at Knox College tell me, "Do what you love and people will want to be around you." So I love writing this stuff, and I found communities of people all over the world writing haiku and when I share it with people outside that community, they can see value in it.

Most of the time when I do readings, I'm not reading in my haiku community. I'm reading into the wider world of poetry. I feel like it's an ambassadorship, showing people that it is a serious form and I can demonstrate that. Usually people come away getting something out of it. You can see in their eyes which poems land.

People often end up being surprised by how extremely accessible haiku is. It's not to say that there's not depth, but it shouldn't present itself as something you couldn't understand. That's part of the point. We want you to understand.

DECEMBER: Some contemporary poetry gets criticized for the opposite quality — being so opaque that it's incomprehensible.

GAA: It seemed like the Eliots and Pounds took things to where you have as many footnotes on the page as you have actual lines of poetry sometimes. It seemed like poetry got divorced from the common person.

DECEMBER: Do you feel like you're outside the mainstream of poetry?

GAA: There might have been a time when I thought about that. But I'm so in love with the form and have so many opportunities to submit to journals and have things in print. It hasn't stymied me from doing readings or being asked to talk to classes. Yes, my haiku is probably not going to be in the main journals that I looked up to prior to being a haiku poet, but I stopped caring about that. It's not necessarily a world that I'm clamoring to get into.

Haiku is kind of its own thing. There's a purity to it. Because it's not institutionalized in writing programs. The people who write this at a very high level, they're accessible. They want to talk to you. They're very welcoming as long as they know you're interested in it, and not laughing at it.

DECEMBER: What can non-haiku poets learn from haiku poets?

GAA: If you decide to write a villanelle or some kind of form, look beyond the rhyme scheme. Figure out what this form does that others forms don't. Why does it exist? Hopefully it's beyond just an academic exercise.

Another thing would be to think about compression, using fewer words. Saying

more with less. And don't be afraid to be accessible. Sometimes it can be a sign of pandering, that you want to please people. You can be accessible without pandering to your audience.

DECEMBER: You work at a life sciences company as an IT analyst. Does your job ever find its way into your haiku?

GAA: Not really. They're pretty separate parts of my life. When people ask me what I do, I say I have my Clark Kent day job at the Daily Planet, and then at night I get to be Superman. I get to be a poet. 🍷