

Review by Nick Avis

PULLING OUT THE BENT NAIL by Gary Hotham
Wind Chimes Press - 1988

This minibook from Wind Chimes Press is quite exceptional. Even though it contains only twelve haiku, most of them are so well crafted and resonate with such depth and insight, they make you feel you have absorbed in a very short space of time a great wealth of experience

the way back--
every star the naked eye
can see

In this period of experimentation with content and a plethora of "new haiku", Hotham's work reminds us what haiku is really all about. There is hardly a poem here that Basho could not have written over three hundred years ago, yet there is nothing imitative about them. They speak with a contemporary voice and are as meaningful in the context of the North America we live in as they would have been in Basho's time and will be in time to come. There is not a single superfluous word, very few adjectives and no technical devices used. Nowhere does the poet intrude upon the reader with his thoughts or ideas, and each moment is allowed to speak for itself, permitting the reader to enter into the immediacy of the experience. The events and images are so ordinary that most of us pass them by every day without noticing them. Yet Hotham, whether he is banging in a nail, standing by a window on a Sunday morning, or listening to music with a cup of tea, simply and dramatically captures these moments with extraordinary precision, opening the way to a multitude of interpretations and hidden layers of meaning:

beginning rain--
pulling out the bent nail
starting another

breath marks
on the windowpane--
Sunday morning

music two centuries old--
the color flows
out of the teabag

Hotham also reminds us that haiku, whatever else we might imagine it to be, is poetry, and that the poet's material is language, especially its rhythms, sound and cadence. And, occasionally, as in "beginning rain", the sounds and echoes of his music reverberate in the mind with the perfect pitch of a well-tuned instrument.

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