

God Bless You, Mrs. Maloney, Wherever You Are

It has been over 40 years now since my first contact with the haiku as a high school sophomore in Mrs. Maloney's English class. Our textbook focused on literature around the world and included a short section on the Japanese haiku. I particularly remember a haiku by Kusatao Nakamura on the greening of spring and his child teething. The image and the moment stuck and has resonated in my memory for years. I don't remember now who did the translation for the textbook but here is R. H. Blyth's version:

Among the myriad leaves of spring
My child has begun
To cut his teeth.

At that time, Mrs. Maloney, decided we would write two haiku for homework that she would read aloud in class the next day without attribution. One haiku was to follow exactly the 5-7-5 syllable count while the other could be less strict in form. One might think this an easy assignment but back then writing poetry was not the kind of homework I looked forward to. I don't recall any specifics about the two I wrote other than they attempted to be humorous. Hopefully the written record of them has vanished into the thin air of such juvenilia. Since then, I have written enough bad haiku that have been published and confront me from time to time that I don't need those two to come back and embarrass me. And that was my introduction to the haiku.

I didn't start writing haiku then, but, when I began writing poetry on a regular basis within the next year or so it was a poetic form among the many I would attempt from time. And one I thought in my own mind I had some success with. When I did start sending poems out to magazines the haiku were the ones that were accepted more than any other type of poem I wrote.

Some time by the end of my first year of university I had stopped writing altogether since the frustration level became too high between what I wanted for my poetry and what I was producing. And besides, I had too many other interests. But during my last year the urge to write re-asserted itself and the focus of that effort became the haiku. Its brevity, the sharpness of its imagery, and its penetrating focus on a state of being or a moment in time helped me create the poetry I wanted to write. It is a form that as James Tipton stated so well gives me "the possibility of discovering new energy through words put together with precision and emotion." Since then, writing poetry has been a very regular endeavor and the haiku has been the structure for those poems. So, I thank you, Mrs. Barbara Maloney, for what you brought into my life those many years ago. God bless you wherever you are.

~Gary Hotham

Kusatao Nakamura's haiku is found in R. H. Blyth's *A History of Haiku*, Vol. Two, Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1964, p. 218.

James Tipton quote from *The Haiku Anthology: English Language Haiku by Contemporary American and Canadian Poets*, Cor van den Heuvel, editor, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974, p. 270.

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