

A Pebble Cast . . . Into Listener's Mind

By Lynn Wright

The soft muslin cover, beige and maroon, the tiny gold fan encrested in the upper corner with its fine Japanese calligraphic decoration, the stark, black letters of the title—A Net of Fireflies—All beckoned me to take up the book, to open it, and to scan the beautifully bound pages. Once inside, I entered a world of haikus. With a cursory glance, I was able to capture something of the spirit throughout the book. But the real joy came after reading and mulling over the essence of the thoughts presented in the poems.

To fully appreciate the brief poems and the delicate brush drawings, I looked briefly into the background in an attempt to understand better the method, the philosophy, and the purpose behind haikus and haigas. A haiku, in effect, is a three line image-thought of seventeen syllables divided so that the first line has five syllables; the second, seven; and the third, five. The emphasis is on the object—the poet is nowhere to be seen. It uses neither rhyme nor meter and can be distinguished from prose only by the melody of assonance, alliteration, and onomatopoeia.

At first sight the haiku seems no more than a sensuous perception of nature, but it acquires hidden depth of the Infinite. In fleeting and fragmentary glimpses, it reflects the dark lower waters of earthly existence, and because of its very incompleteness, it leaves the reader's imagination open to recreate something of the poet's original moment of realization. Meaning dawns slowly on the reader.

A true haiku is a swift record in words of a sudden flash of insight into the nature of things. The meaning echos beyond the few carefully chosen words presented in each poem. The intellectual background is never obvious, but it is always there. "To those discerning of spiritual values and the physical qualities consonant with them, one simple haiku by a master like Matuo Basho is worth more than a whole loudly acclaimed volume of verse with merely contemporary appeal . . .", says Harold Stewart in "A Net of Butterflies."

Haigas, the pictorial counterparts to haikus, are used to reinforce the impressions of the poems. Drawn as the haiku is written—in a single breath, without thought or hesitation—the haiga depicts naive impressions of nature with economy and child-like simplicity. "The mystery of haiga lies in its clumsiness. If drawn with a vigorous spirit, a sublime beauty shows through the very gaucheness of the picture," Stewart says. Haikus catch atmosphere by using sound to express the soundless—pauses are as important as the words. In the same way, what is not there—the empty space—is one of the most important elements of the haiga.

The reader's first impression is much the same as that of a haiku. The eye sees first abstract patterns of lines, shapes, and colors; but later the realization of a subject breaks through. Both haiku and haiga are produced only after the artist has reached a state of "No-Mind" which is attained through medita-

tion when all illusion of individual ego is eliminated.

Meditation, self-realization, and self-reliance are the keynotes in producing haiga and haiku. By meditation the artist empties his mind of all mental burdens, unnecessary worries, and wandering thoughts in order to reach self-realization. Emptiness in this sense (No-Mind) does not mean the opposite of fullness, but rather, an unconditional state in which there is nothing to be given and nothing to be received. "True emptiness cannot be included or excluded," according to "Buddhism and Zen." "When you count your inhalations and exhalations, contending thoughts will gradually disappear leaving no trace."

Meditation is the way for an individual to find his inner treasure and to see it for himself. One who has learned to meditate depends on intuition to make decisions. During meditation the present moment contains the entire universe of the individual. There is no past, no future. First tranquility is achieved, then insight. When the human mind has absolute freedom within its true nature, it is then that the mind and body blend in unity, and the realization of oneness of all life comes. At this time the still, small voice of insight speaks to the artist of haiku or haiga. Most sensitive people have had at some time such inner states of going nowhere in a timeless moment—by "the smell of burning leaves on a morning of autumn haze, a flight of sunlit pigeons against a thundercloud, the sound of an unseen waterfall at dusk . . ." says author Alan Watts. It is just then, when that vivid glimpse of the world is caught.

It is impossible to discuss, describe, or even understand the philosophy underlying haiku without an involved study which I am not equipped to undertake. A brief sketch of basic beliefs is presented here. Orientals live in the present; they accept everyday routine, loss and change, inevitable death and decay. The haiku reflects this view often, and also another belief. The haiku form depends upon the relationship between the "positive"—the finite and temporal which is ever-moving and changing—and the "negative"—the infinite and eternal void which is static and changeless. The intuition of the haiku travels between these. For example, in the poem

There sat the great bronze Buddha.

From his hollow

Nostril suddenly darted out—a swallow.

Buddha is the immobile and monumental negative absorbed into timelessness. The positive is the swallow, who, with "nature's sublime disregard for limited human conceptions of the sacred," Stewart says, "has built a nest in the statue's nostril. The two are put together to show that "each and every particular . . . of Existence is the background of Non-Existence," Stewart continues. To show the relationship of the finite (Existence) to the infinite (Non-Existence), often haikus make an abrupt shift from the microscopic to the macroscopic. For example,

Sun set on the swamp
With orange glare—A ball of gnats,
Revolving in air.
The gnats (finite) depend upon the sun
(infinite) for life.

Haiku poets believe that all things are transient—happiness as well as sorrow. Their poems have an awareness of this which is not quite grief and not quite nostalgia, but the echo of what has passed and of what was loved. Thus,

The evening haze;
Thinking of past things
How far-off they are!

To the Oriental, the order of the world is a dynamic balance between the two forces—yang and yin, positive and negative. There is no duality, no conflict between the natural element of chance and the human element of control. The technique of haiku and haiga is "discipline in spontaneity and spontaneity in discipline," according to Watts. Opposites are relational and fundamentally harmonious. There can be no ultimate conflict when pairs of opposites are mutually interdependent. The fundamental principle of Oriental philosophy is relativity. They believe that in not hurrying, the purposeless life misses nothing, "for it is only when there is no goal and no rush that the human senses are fully open to receive the world," Watts says. "When life is empty, with respect to the past, and aimless, with respect to the future, the vacuum is filled by the present—normally reduced to hair-line, a split second in which there is no time for anything to happen," he continues. This does not mean that the Oriental philosophy leaves no room for action or for doing. The major stress lies on activity of the mind and the fact that thought is the basis for everything, but conscious effort and action also have their place.

The point to remember here is that meditation in everyday life is emphasized and that the haiku is the means of expressing that sudden flash of insight which results from emptying the mind of thoughts—past and future. A haiku is "a pebble thrown into the pool of the listener's mind," Watts concludes.

