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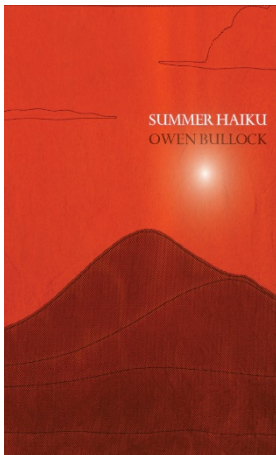
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TEXT review

That simple-yet-elusive something: appreciating haiku of seasons and camping through conversational reading and writing together

review by Jayne Linke and Amelia Walker



Owen Bullock

Summer Haiku

Recent Work Press, Canberra ACT 2019

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The core of the haiku is that light touch and simplicity which shines on the spirit of the poem ... that certain something that is almost impossible to explain ... maybe wabi sabi. (Bruce 2018)

Now, in my ageing and more mellow days I've come to accept questions for just what they are – questions. At last I allow mystery to be mystery. And this is where haiku fits in. (Dobb 2017)

We meet in the café with the orange walls, as we have on a semi-regular basis for some time now. But today is different. Usually we meet to talk about poetry, and Jayne writes some. Today we are meeting to read and review Owen Bullock's *Summer Haiku* – a new experiment for us, and our first foray into co-authorship.

As the *TEXT* reviews co-editor largely responsible for matching books with reviewers, I was stumped when *Summer Haiku* landed on my desk. Like a haiku, the book itself is small and unassuming: pocket-sized, with a cover I at first glance thought red. When I gave it more time, I appreciated magenta mountains against a red-gold-orange sky with pencil outline clouds and what could be a sun or a moon glowing white and sharp, yet hazy, as though through mountain fog. I point this out not simply to compliment the publisher (though it stands that such elements of the book-as-object result from time and energy that deserves more recognition than it sometimes gets). I point it out because my experience of appreciating *Summer Haiku*'s cover is analogous to what a good haiku lets its reader experience: something that initially seems simple, but which on closer inspection unfolds into more and more thinkable readings, associations and possibilities. The problem is, only some readers are open and attuned to the haiku manner of unfolding, and even the right reader must be in the right headspace – an unhurried space of calm, with plenty of time for unpressured reflection. (Try finding that among academics in today's culture of precarity, panic, deadlines and ever-increasing demands, as Palmer & Cantrell [2019] eloquently describe).

Then I glanced at the poem that has for fifteen years been pasted on my study wall – on every study wall in every place I've lived, or bedroom walls in share-houses where I had no other room of my own. It's a poem by Jayne about learning to walk again following a serious car accident. It is but a few lines – but what lines they are. I have read it again and again, yet it grabs me afresh every time. The language is unpretentious: no flourishes for the sake of flourishes, just statements of things as they are. Yet every word is charged and sparks in multiple directions. I can read the whole poem in half a moment, but the process of appreciation continues and changes always. This is characteristic of all Jayne's poems (see Linke 2017, 2020a) and precisely what is needed in a reviewer of a controlled-yet-intricate work like *Summer Haiku*.

I emailed Jayne to ask if she'd be up for it. She agreed, but we both knew we'd have to do things a little differently: Jayne's accident has made writing and many other things far more involved and more challenging for her than they are for most people. Although she has learned to walk in small ways, she requires a motorised wheelchair both at home and for all outings. Holding a pen to write is an exhausting feat of strength and coordination. The old clichés about writing as a lonely process and the struggle for motivation are exacerbated for those with limitations on mobility that in turn limit access to spaces, experiences and social interactions – things that I, as a writer, find crucial for feeding inspiration and the desire to write. To combat this, and in addition to maintaining what is now a friendship of two decades, our coffee catc-ups are about me giving Jayne provocations in response to which she pens short poems that her mother and carer, Helen, types on a computer later.

To write this review, reading and discussing *Summer Haiku* takes the place of the usual loose-themed and/or open avenues of conversation and literary inquiry Jayne and I would ordinarily pursue in meandering search for poetic triggers. We begin on page one: a haiku about summer heat.

‘Subtly resounding,’ Jayne murmurs with a nod as she takes the poem in. We read it aloud a second time, which Melbourne poet Myron Lysenko once told me is important for appreciating haiku poems on both their immediate and deferred levels. After a pause, Jayne reaches for her paper and pen. She writes:

Like a shawl, it holds
 Body heat in, an aura
 It shimmers, vague fuzz (Linke 2020b)

This response simultaneously pulls me elsewhere and back to the poem by Bullock, which evokes the ‘snap and crack’ of broom seeds – of pods bursting in the summer heat (1). Jayne’s evocation of heat as a tactile bodily experience and the visible haze it creates causes me to recognise the mixture of visual, tactile and auditory senses at play in Bullock’s poem, too. This becomes a new lesson for me in how to read not only the rest of the poems in *Summer Haiku*, but all haiku and poetry generally. As Bruce (2018) notes, the economical power of poems that somehow express volumes through but a few words is elusive, often a mystery. The juxtaposition of multiple senses is, however, one device that seems to support it. This quality in Bullock’s work is one Jayne and I continue noticing as we continue reading *Summer Haiku*. We agree quickly, it is a profound, accomplished book.

Bullock’s opening poem about heat sets the scene well for those that follow, which describe moments of camping – from a single trip or several?¹ Jayne and I are unsure, but this ambiguity does not detract from our reading experience. If anything, it enhances it, for going camping tends to invoke different relationships with temporality to those typically observed in cities, suburbs, workplaces and other structured, oft-busy places. This is brought to my attention by Jayne’s poem in response to Bullock’s depiction of camp corn tasting ‘of last night’s smoke’ (13). Jayne writes:

Camp Life:

The horde eats, plays, competes,
 Juggles life’s intermission
 People come and go. (Linke 2020b)

and:

Camp Waking Up:

Tents unfurl, a stretch,

A yawn. The morning happens.
The lunch gong? People throng. (Linke 2020b)

The quick leap from breakfast to lunch in Linke's poem perfectly captures the sense I also gain from Bullock of time that is simultaneously stretched and compressed – of being so in the moment that a half day can pass in what seems but a flash, and yet the sensory wonder of smelling smoke or biting into corn can resonate for many eternities. This brings me to appreciate the subtle skill with which Bullock has ordered the collection: *Summer Haiku* – which actually contains two sections, the first on Summer and the second on Winter – resists what would have been an easy temptation to order poems in ways imitative of any heavy-handed chronology. The poems instead take an order of recall and reflection much like sifting through memories in private or chatting casually with a friend about events that come to mind in the order they come to mind. Contrast and an emotive arc are created through variations in the types of moments and experiences the poems focus in on. Frequent moments of humour – for instance, finding pillows on the fifth night of camping (3) and a llama that 'cleans its teeth / on the wire fence' (12) – complement more sombre reflections on growing older (5) and death (16). Celebrations of ecological beauty, such as in Bullock's poem about a yellow butterfly transforming 'from piece of air / to piece of air' (8), enhance the poignant urgency of poems that recognise human-caused environmental problems such as plastic in waterways (11), species endangerment / extinction (23) light pollution (9) and climate change (10). Jayne and I also delight over the thought Bullock has devoted to visually positioning his words and lines in ways that add yet more to the experience of reading – for instance through devices of alignment, indentation, and significant spaces between words or lines. The 'Winter Poems' section foregrounds this especially. One of our favourite poems in the Summer section is about an 'i n c h w o r m' on a Scrabble board (30). In response to this, Jayne writes of 'Shifts':

Shifting moods, and rooms
Changing hands, a new dealer. Or, new game?
Boundaries will move! (Linke 2020b)

I think to myself how boundaries are indeed shifting within me as Jayne and I read and think about *Summer Haiku* together. Through her responses to Bullock's astounding book, she is helping me appreciate elements of haiku I would previously have missed. It really does feel like a whole new game. Or as per the final poem of Bullock's Winter sequence, like being washed over by a sunset in which:

...the tide brings
the colours in (57)

Notes

¹ Later we read in the back of the book that the poems were ‘written over three summers, camping on our piece of land near Waihi in Aotearoa, New Zealand’ (58).

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Before sustaining injuries in an accident, Jayne Linke completed a Bachelor of Social Sciences at Adelaide University. In later years Jayne has published two anthologies through Ginninderra Press: Moonbeams in the Bitter Rain (2017) and Nature’s Cache (2020). She has read at Friendly St, The Hills Poets, and for disability and rehabilitation students at Flinders University.

Amelia Walker is one-third of the TEXT reviews co-editing team. She is also an independent creative writer and researcher currently employed on a teaching-only contract at a South Australian university.