Living with haiku [poems]

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LIVING WITH HAIKU

by

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I.

*I am but a nervous man, by circumstance and by my own deeds; but I am observant.*

~ Joseph Brodsky ~
SUNDAY

I.

Warming to sun from the door
  open just a slender foot,

  toes hoping to hook themselves
    by the nails. Watching the cat

  tug on a rug, his shoulders
    muscular as an ocean.

II.

The sun is a redheaded
  boy hiding behind pillows.

Was it your mother who said
  the boy is reading in bed?

Was it your father who mows
  by walking in a circle?

III.

So English how the clouds
  queue the sun with questions.

Walking jongrom, asphalt
  unfolds like a chow tongue

  under my feet; the path
    paved with karma and tar
I pray in the dark because I feel more transparent. And I've tried hiding. *Even the devils submit when we use your name*, say apostles in Luke. I, too, succeed though it's not relief I am asking for. The refrigerator gives too much light; landlord knows I'm home. Unenlightened, eviction closer than God, *Oh Lord,* I begin-- weary, bereft of insight-- *I'm trying.* I expect the phone, the forced call for rent. I deserve this living poor as a winter tick, feeding off the host in Sunday Mass, dependance on a Lord. I tell God: money is faith, nothing more.
LISTENING TO BACH

There must be songs, hum-a-long
tunes to recreate our wet hips
and triplet breath, these misting
rooms we intend to share forever.

When the soul goes dreaming
and we make love, each oily cell
returns to those faraway places
found first in song. andante, andante,

you whisper imagining Gould
with his arms in warm towels,
summoning his tonal bloom,
loosening each ribbon of finger
REALIZATION

_for Martha Elizabeth_

To attract cats
  amputate
  your left leg

breathe
  even as
  evening mist

horizon
in their eyes
  you appear

unmovingly
  so approaches
  quicken

when they pause
  predatory
  tuck the other

you are now
  cross-legged
  as a stone

Cats will come
  sunbathingly
  trust me
FIVE HAIKU

A white butterfly,
a cherry blossom;
me in my thermals.

Haiku in the litter box
... battery acid
soaking the white beach.

The head of my cat--
a satellite dish turning,
remote control lost.

Haiku the cougar
dozes over the cold mole.
Who's the holy ghost?

The head of my cat--
a satellite dish turning,
remote control lost.

The jet above
invisible; the town
below hopeless.
FEELING FOR CANCER

He lotions
to soothe
winter skin,

inching
his wife's breasts
before sleep,

thumbing
for knots--
a swollen globe

of blood
gone wrong--
knowing tumors

kernel
without
sound.
JAZZ IN KENTUCKY

\textit{creator to artist to you}
- Art Blakey

Like an aging house
slack-jawed Blakey
settles into drums

we tom-tom
along
and evening comes

glissando
switching
to riveted-ride

his wristing
rain
falls county-wide

his glistening
cymbal
sounds of dew

and grass
responds
with deeper blue.
MISTERIOSO

Mister Monk
you were bold
to hold the eighth.

Listening,
my head floats
in a winter hole.

So Mister,
go on, go oh-so
slow,

like a bad-hipped
man in December
Syncopate

your solar blues,
so the slow
floes break away.
BY THE STILL WATER

Natalia chants in faint, susurrant tones:
\textit{lattissimus muscle, thoracic bone}.

Shoulder for Mother, Dad in the ass,
she says the body entombs the past.

Massaging to unbind, she thumbs
my rosary spine, plumbing

the thickest tissue-- the slipknot
I resist like a clenched fist.

Natalia presses her palms evenly
through almond balm and evening's

bathing soaps the soul, though as yet,
she finds remembrance I'd rather forget.
FIRST TIME AT 7-ELEVEN

Uncle pumped unleaded supreme
and we bought slurpees, boys
sucking straws until the first head

flashed behind a public phone;
a dime-like gleam my brother
called UFO Escaped patients

swarmed our car like erratic
fish, their predatory eyes
clear as sin. A luminous hand

squeaked the windshield,
grabbed Uncle like a sleeve
though he never once moved.

Too mean to care,
their quick quick knuckles
hail stormed the hood

and one danced barefoot
in fertilized grass, each
hurricane turn accompanied

by violent words, unknown
profanities chanted
before a hissing sprinkler.

My hands were slow, unable
to lock the doors. Paralyzed
by this storm, I believed

in the evil of this world;
the fist of evening cloth,
a slow, breathing darkness.
SUNDAY MORNING WESTERN

The lampshade is a snake-infested butte
and during commercials I horseback
for troughs of milk; the kitchen floor

a chaparral soundtrack: corn pop gravel,
 crackers for loot; the house becoming
Utah, Colorado, Wyoming. I shoulder

the broom like a rifle sighting bandits--
their eyes squint-lines on the plaster wall.
Thrown like a saddle to the couch,

I envy Little Beaver's life--
sidekick to a peaceable man.
I try wrinkling first-grade skin

into gulches arid for March;
a place Red Ryder might someday
search. Less than an hour away,

the sermon will echo the roaming
at home, echo Deaddy rehearsing
how I damn well better learn

to make the bed. I picture God
kneading the hand-me-down quilt
beneath the pillow's swollen lip.
THE LAST ACT OF LOVE

for Sylvia Plath

The life-force you claim
*subdued the first pills,*

how long did it stay?
When the slow nurse

punctured a vein
to save my life, I can't

say I was relieved.
The infected bladder

that turned my urine
the color of blood

remains a blessing.
The same poor nurse

triggered the wrong dye
through my body. Too much

congestion took my breath
and I travelled too long--

a perilous, frail thing.
Losing heat in the gown

tied like a shoestring,
I did not imagine

friends beside the casket
crying with ancient regrets.

Mother did not collapse
and forego the balance

of pleasures: the unexpected
kindness found in sorrow,
the undying love
from that one good friend.

We live in a sack of skin
unable to hide our passage
back to dust.
A friend says we die
from stupidity or old age;
I experienced one, lost
desire for the other.
For once, the headlights
were soft and I crossed
one line, then another.

Something went wrong twice.
I accepted, but was returned.

Where do I go now?
Your last act of love,
was that coming back
or trying to leave?
II.

_We study the self to forget the self._

~ Dogen ~
UNLIKE EAST CREE INDIANS

   Unwilling to endure
   this brazen fly,

   observing no ritual
   for regeneration,

   whipping a plastic
   flap, crushing

   a fibrous skeleton
   no more essential

   than nosehairs, or
   stem-kicked dandelions,

   I am intently killing.
   But surely the mind

   aware of itself
   observes without anger.
SAMADHI

I.

I use the candle flame
as a pilot, a means
of piercing muscle,
piercing
to the fibrous
bone of essence.

It only goes so far,
this elliptic
arrowhead
tipped of heat,
singeing flesh,
exacting as a force,
but far too massive.

It is an object,
some thing to watch,
some thing to
gauge
detachment.

I turn the mind
upon itself,
investigating
that
which happens,
that
which makes us
who we are...

beginning and
ending in
the temple of self.
II.

The crater of wax that forms as a result of the lit wick, manmade beginning to end, forms unlike volcanic cousins along the Cascade Range-- those unreliable kinfolk in the matter at hand. It rises by accumulation, but overflows only when I am closed, or the windows open-- windy wind normal no matter the what. Streets the color of a skillet, contain places of weakness, concave depressions, cast-iron puddles of rain reflecting limbs of a hemlock-- limbs like a grandmother's arm. Depression works. It is sufficient as an alms bowl, or an exhibition to visit time to time: cousin to the past, father to the self. The self does not exist, it simply arises out of need.

The self accumulates in the weakest things we can think of...
AS WE SPEAK

A black cat in wet grass
unhooks its claws
from the diseased tree.

From the barking yard
another tree's leaves
breeze encouragingly

Turning gray daily
facing the vassa--
the season of rain

-- a maple embraces
its missing limbs,
embraces the vine

curling out now
from its chest
like an arm

to protect the cat
from the hurricane
well on its way.
THE KINGDOM OF GRACE

As a child I would race
to an imagined finish,
pedal myself to exhaustion

then lift my fluttering
hands like prayer flags
in that victorious breeze

Coach said we all deserved.
Before a cheering grandstand
of trees, I summoned the holy

glories: Mantle, Gehrig, and Ruth,
as if their manifest presence
would provide invitation

to the kingdom of grace.
Born to a family of hunters,
my thumb muscle

too soft, unable to cock the hammer
and ready myself, I chose
diamonds before ravines:

a game in which balls were thrown,
driven deep with a bat
weighing thirty-three exact

ounces-- cupped for speed
the way thin-wristed boys
desire. Squirrely chested,

but quick as wind, I chewed
loose the leather strings
from hundred dollar gloves

during practice. Hungry
for drama, I'd signal
from shallow center,
urge Coach to fungo
long fly balls down
foul lines, then sprint

through power gaps,
swoop to snatch
the ball backhanded,

then throw a one-hop,
waist-high
shot to the bag--

a step behind
imagined runners.
In games I loafed,

took extra half-steps
to encourage illusion,
wanting extra-base

expectations to rise
within opposing hitters.
Early inning catches

were designed to look
awkward, a slow jump
laying the groundwork

for late-inning surprise.
Chasing the uncatchable
in practice, I planned

the hand-wringing
dives that stop rallies;
the moving a few steps

more toward the line,
hoping the hitter
drove me to the wall.
SENATOR WALTER JOHNSON

He used his arm like a finger-tipped whip, an eccentric lash he learned on the farm flinging grit to chickens. He never slipped a thumbtack into his glove, never charmed the ball with grease, never hit the hitter just to make a point. He threw with a hand so huge the baseball flit like spit in wind, rising in the slipstream for bewildered bats to miss. Fans called his fastball, *Train*, a whistling pitch he gripped across the seams. His only cheating was a thrown deceit, the kind of speed Bernoulli knew explains not only force, but why the experts win--they alter pressure by applying spin.
ELEVEN O'CLOCK KOAN

I was attached to
meaning saying:
This is a watch

I was attached to
nothing saying:
This is not a watch
LIVING WITH HAIKU

I.

Winter... hoses
    coiled... the cat
and me... sleeping

~

Winter... the creek
    frozen over...
    my former wife

~

Winter... trapeize
    ... hanging long johns
    over gas heat

II.

In the dream I am
Egyptian... humming along;
    a car stuck in mud.

~

The mechanic says:
*cat's timing chain is broken,*
*no other answer.*

~

Cats kissing in snow
    each licking the rear
    wheel of the other.
III.

Haiku burns two paws
touching the candle;
   I dream the word abortion.

~

Haiku licks each paw
again and again:
   remorse is a wide river

~

Asleep, no alarm..
   her nightgown falling...
      we are both cheating...

IV.

We go through postures:
   the cat's belly to the moon,
      me kneeling easy

~

Like a rusty hinge
   the kettle beckons--
      loosening my aria.

~

The desk lamp on  off
Haiku seems to be winking
      at the empty page.
IF GOD ONLY KNEW

Preacher Paul
treads barefoot
through rotten fruit,
mud-colored flesh
he calls the body
of Christ. I walk

all over the Lord,
he'll say, ignoring
the assembly of wasps--
yellow-bellied devils
hungry for sweet blessings.
He calls them Sunday

as if every living thing
resembles the day
of rest. Paul tells us

hard, persistent work
tends to make a man
look down, never up.

Once, I confessed
disbelief and Paul
prayed: Good Lord

hear not such doubt.
During summer revival,
he appears; walking-

staff passed down
from a beggar in Jericho.
No one believes

he was prostrate, begging
forgiveness in the dust.
When he was ten,
Paul threw ceramic
vases of grape juice
against the hand-painted
doors of St. Francis.

*Catholics drink alcohol
during Mass, calling it

Christ's blood*, he protested.
August homecomings,
devout women extend

invitations and Paul joins,
asking only: *sweet milk*
and the touch of angels.
BARRACOON

for Helga, Andrew Wyeth's model

Despite the sexual suggestion
in a hip this smooth,

an unblemished bulb of flesh;
your length a half-lingering

dampness wrung from his sable-bristled brush; your loosely braided

hair combed to a dark cavity;
despite the cable nakedly

framing the room— the canvas
suffused in bunkered gloom;

despite the egg-white vision
in Pennsylvania, or your face

forever turned in tempera,
I find this room desireless

(more enclosure, than barrack)
and your crusty heel neglected.
BALTIMORE

I.

I do not hear
the softening sole
toward the porch.

I lie regardless;
a piece of rope
on a pond of sleep.

Someone intends
to enter— flashing
light by windows.

Snow only confirms
what the body
shows by waking late.

II.

What would I have done
had the someone reached
completely?

What instinct weapons
with a shoe horn,
or a clock?

Refrain from taking
_life_ was the precept.
What of that remains?
III.

Away from the bedroom
red water
alarms the detective.

Away from the bedroom
kidney beans
porous as cotton socks.

Away from the bedroom
the crockpot
simmers with morning soup.

Away from the bedroom
my neighbor
questions the oriole.

Away from the bedroom
Nina sings
*a hard town by the sea.*
III.

In high mountains
the late grass
grows as fast as it can.

~ W. S. Merwin~
THE ATLANTIC HOTEL

I.

Hand-in-hand
with evening... thinking
you are slipping-

in to the needle
in this known home.
I am the counterman

when they pass coupons
next door I whisper
 Ginseng and echinacea

when they come trembling.
I recommend swimming.
I am an island

when they feel surrounded.
They are trustafarians
with elusive veins.

They are junkies.
Believe me, I say:
Kevorkian lives here.

And they respond.
we are terminal
in a thousand ways.
II.

I am uneasy
bathing
when the ocean
foams...

I am uneasy
pointing
to the Carolinas
forming...

I am uneasy
knowing
how the Atlantic
storms...

III.

Morning, the cat wide-eyed
when I flush the commode.

He watches as childhood
splashes back to Hurricane

Hugo, his big-mouth waves
smashing the cereal houses

on the coast of Carolina;
the tornado slingning Davis

like a bag of trash--
his arm all over the yard.

Morning swims so close
the ocean leaves seashells
on the bathroom floor;
the girl who chased fireflies

through the murderous
undertow of the motel pool.

the girl who drowned
before the word was formed.

The cat's eyes are closed,
but the beams are coastal;

the walls bleached with sun.
The dog's ears are sea grass

rising from the carpet.
I am standing in sand.
ADVICE TO MY BROTHER

Beware of fishnet sweaters; the girl more feline than the meowing cat.

~ ~ ~

Seen through a lawn chair--
your back seems a pear,
your wife's a lively mango.

~ ~ ~

The red delicious,
its puckered top an anus--
customers hate that!

~ ~ ~

Lively as children--
the cart with bottles of milk and its wheel bouncing.

~ ~ ~

The paranoid car ahead,
forever braking;
my dreams are stop signs.
ROSES

_for Bill O'Neil_

Water this bouquet---
supposedly, each petal
resembles the truth.

--- --- ---

It was the last one---
perhaps the florist believes
love's out of season.

--- --- ---

Tenacious dachshund,
let go of the hand freezing
your mind-- it's summer.

--- --- ---

Your dog is barking---
his echo returns: German
for smoke leaving earth.

--- --- ---

Kitty-cat tiptoes
her claws retracted;
your wife
is thinking divorce.

--- --- ---

You found her with him---
Now, like the ocean, be sure
to leave salt behind.
Your halogen wife
  prefers his darkness
to a grounded life.

Like warm breath on glass--
  one trying, one not;
you speak so sadly of sex.

You have no children,
  so the lawyer speaks quickly;
the sun does not move.

She took possession
  of the truck-- you are walking
further and further.

Your hand was patient
  giving the ring
and taking it back--
  good enough!

Consider Stafford, again:
  what the river says,
  that is what I say.
THE PERCUSSIONIST

His buzzroll was an engine
recently tuned. stick height

parallel half-an-hour;
spacing metronomic

through cre- and decrescendo;
greater and lesser volume

for the lay of fluctuating
sand. Teaching the creek-
bed's alteration— steadfast,
even there— Mendenhall

stood barefoot snaring
applause from passings

on the footbridge. Some
say he found drugs

in Revere, became erratic,
though in truth, his timing

expanded. He was genius
in the sway of syncopation

and he lengthened pause,
so that even now... I'm lagging.
IN THE SPACE OF A COW

She was udderly
heavy hoofing
the needle bank

... misdirected...
no mooing, no odors,
lost... snorting finally

forward she towed
her heft toward
the pasture faintly

passing ...gasing
UNHOLY GHOSTS

The mailbox refuses
to open his door;
I disguise my voice.

~

I tell the other
person inside me:
you are not living, okay?

~

The mind is telling me
my belly is a maroon
balloon full of wine.

~

The mind is telling me
my kidneys are teenagers
in search of a car

~

The mind is telling me
my testicles are berries
ripe despite the vine.
HIKING WITH A BUDDHIST MONK

Bass Creek churns
past a snake-headed
rock sloped for speed.

Beneath its fury
an Asian mist
climbs the loblolly
canyon. Clear water
foams: a peroxide
for damaged hearts.

Ajahn begins to hum
the Metta Sutta--
a song for the born
and unborn; for bluebells
and trillium springing
late this year.

For no better reason
than absolute need,
I close my eyes.
SOMETHING PLEASING

The shore released its remedies,
But we were never coastal.
Your tone was a missing path.

The locals wore lantern faces
Over robes we confused for
Remorse and the tow was going

Over and over the same terrain.
Passive aggressive, you said,
Passive aggressive as though

Scolding. The hoarse ocean.
The cabernet sweats. Crescent
Footprints from high arches

In the sand eroding slowly.
We were blue and musical
When the pier was a swinging

Bridge before us. Remember
How the gusts were disgruntled
cousins? Remember the inlet

Of seaweeds guiding you
To a lovely place of bathing?
If we knew when either

Could expect the other,
I would summon a frothy
sea by candlelight, disrobe

By the bedroom window,
And say follow the bright love
All the way and forever to home.
FOR CHEEVER

The day is a cul-de-sac,
a pear, a light bulb;
why walk in circles?

Skin me with a switch--
the sun in the sky
behaving as my father.

Too mechanical:
the swimmer underwater:
no mantra, no song.
FOR CLAUS CHEE SONNY

I.

I am told voices
   travel with insects...

I am told corn
   listens for gossip...

I am told to boil
   bones for grease...

I am told cameras
   speak the truth...

I am told to clear
   the way... persist.

II.

When you tongue the sweet stick,
   the beaver tells his age.

When you dream of babies,
   you should be hunting bear.

When the hard sun turns away,
   dive like a rough-legged hawk.

When the water seems endless,
   study the clouds to find land.