

Sinking into silence: the haiku achievement of Caroline Gourlay

Born in 1939, Caroline Gourlay, née Clegg, worked as a social worker and a piano tutor, and has lived for many years at Hill House, in Knighton, Herefordshire, on the Wales–England border. There, her husband Simon, who died in 2019, was a beef, dairy and free-range-egg farmer, who was knighted for his services to farming. In recent years, they wintered in Lewes, near their three sons in Brighton. Gourlay joined the British Haiku Society in 1995, and succeeded Jackie Hardy as editor of its journal, *Blithe Spirit*, in 1998.¹

Gourlay had contributed haiku to *Iron* and *Time Haiku* before her first haiku, or rather senryu as it was listed, appeared in *Blithe Spirit*, in 1995;² an undistinguished effort which gave little inkling of the brilliance to follow. By 2016, Gourlay had given up writing,³ but in the intervening years, six collections of her haiku were published. Also, in 2005, Poetry Monthly Press (UK) published a collection, *This Country*, of Gourlay's longer poems, which included two haiku sequences and a closing selection of 46 tanka. Indeed, her tanka are arguably as fine as her haiku, but outside the scope of this essay.

Reviewed in the light of 2021, Gourlay's haiku are among the very best of their period and stand the test of time, as I aim to show.

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Crossing the Field, Gourlay's first collection contains just 14 haiku, which, bar one very notable exception, are very much 'beginner's haiku', replete with full punctuation, and largely unworthy of such premature collection.⁴ The book is beautiful: hardback, with lovely paper and complementary pen-and-ink drawings by Anthony Mainwaring. The exception is the first version of what is as good as any of the bird haiku] anthologised in *Wing Beats* 13 years later:⁵

Daylight fading —
a curlew's cry
lengthens the hill.

Even with the upper-case start and full-stopped end which arguably inhibit its room to breathe, this is a special haiku, set in twilight's magic hour, when one's sensory perception regresses to an inherently prehistoric heightened awareness. Wisely, Gourlay doesn't qualify the curlew's call with an adjective, but then the word 'cry' adds enough evocative, haunting beauty in itself not to need one. It's the extraordinary phrase which constitutes the final line which makes this haiku so effective. At first, 'lengthens' in this context seems to mean that the progress of the protagonist walking up or down the hill (surely the former) is delayed by a need to stop and listen to the

curlew; then comes a secondary, almost meaningless, abstract sense which defies exegesis and takes the haiku into another realm of wondrousness.

By the time, four years later, of Gourlay's second, fuller collection, *Reading All Night*, she had all but eschewed punctuation. As with most haiku collections, its standard is variable. The following haiku stands out for the way in which it positions the reader in three time-zones: in the moment of discovery of the beer; in the (longer) time it has taken / is taking for the beer to cool; and, implicitly, in the passage of the seasons to the summer, when ice-cold beer is best enjoyed:

snowy woods—
behind the summer house
beer left to cool ⁶

(The first poem of *Through the Café Door* partly repeats the trick: 'shawled by fog / I walk through frozen trees / to the summerhouse'.)

In *Stepping Stones*, his book of commentaries on haiku by others, Martin Lucas included and wrote about nine haiku by Gourlay, including this from *Reading All Night*:

garden lost in mist
a blackbird's song
where the seat was ⁷

Lucas wrote, 'We convincingly enter a world of sound rather than sight, and the haiku presents a transformation rather than a dull, reductionist realism'.⁸ Nevertheless, Gourlay was, one presumes, depicting her experience exactly as she found – and then lost – it. Discerning slight, unexpected changes, mainly in the natural world, in the landscapes around Knighton, is a theme which her haiku often, perhaps subconsciously, portray, e.g. 'early November / lingering beech leaves / rattle the wind';⁹ the similar 'April breeze— / branches of the ash tree / rearrange the sky';¹⁰ and the subtle 'rain this evening / flagstones grow pale / under the lime tree',¹¹ which is a trompe l'oeil of sorts, because the flagstones protected by the tree are only *seeming* to become paler due to how they become contrasted to the rain-darkened flagstones beyond the tree's canopy. That sense of dislocation is at play in this example too:

low cloud on the hill
a pheasant separated
from his call ¹²

As often is the case in Gourlay's haiku, there's a painterly eye at work here, but the

poetic form affords her the freedom to capture another almost hallucinatory effect which paint – or any other non-verbal medium – could not render. That effect reaches its zenith in *Reading All Night* with this extraordinary haiku:

listen!
the skins of wild damsons
darkening in the rain ¹³

Extraordinary in both senses. It's another which Lucas wrote about, his astute analysis focusing on 'the puzzle of how we can hear the event', and then on the rare sighting of an exclamation mark in a haiku: 'here it allows us to pause and absorb the experience of the moment'.¹⁴ (Incidentally, Gourlay went on to deploy an exclamation mark in one of her worst published haiku: 'ugh! a rat . . . / but your eyes meet mine / as you die'¹⁵). Really, though, our attention would be grabbed even if the mark were absent, because of that one-word imperative which opens the haiku. For me, there's also tremendous poetic dexterity to be found here, in the sonic patterning of listen/darken/rain and of skins/damsons, imitative, surely, of the repetitive sounds of the rain. Then there's the word 'wild', which bestows a better balance to the poem, but also relays the sense of nature being outside humankind's control. It's a good example of an adjective augmenting the power of a haiku. The explicit pictorial sense of the third line is the obverse of the flagstones haiku.

Two more very potent haiku from *Reading All Night* are almost identical in format:

sound of the hunt
slipping under ice
winter stream ¹⁶

bark of a pheasant
sinking into silence
winter afternoon ¹⁷

The first of these is, as far as I know, the only haiku by anyone to address such subject-matter, probably a fox-hunt. Although, as in the second haiku, the middle line acts as a hinge, i.e. it enables the reader to place a caesura at the end of either the first or middle line, there can be little doubt that the poet is somehow wishing that the hunt itself would slip under ice and that sympathy should lie with the poor creature being hounded.

Through the Café Door was one of a series of booklets which established the reputation for excellence of Snapshot Press. Several of Gourlay's booklet's most distinctive and resonant haiku, including the opening and closing ones, are, it seems, set in the gardens of Hill House:

butterflies in the catmint –
the old woman's hands
cannot settle ¹⁸

The reader clearly sees a comparison between the restlessness of the butterflies, at their nectaring, and the hands, but there is so much more to this beautiful haiku; so much so that the non-specification of the butterflies can be forgiven. (In fact, the generic works, because it contains ‘flies’, thereby implying movement, and because the plant is specified.) That marvellously effective third line might be hinting at the aftermath of bereavement of a life-partner; or maybe it’s the effect of arthritis gnarling the woman’s fingers; or something else entirely. One can speculate that the old woman is the poet’s mother or mother-in-law, and that Gourlay didn’t want to disclose the relationship for fear of giving the haiku additional complication – there is enough going on already. The poem contains considerable potency precisely *because* it doesn’t give its game away – it’s a fine example of ‘show, don’t tell’, and of what Lucas called ‘the reader’s poem’. The verb choice is perfect, not least due to the echo of the haiku’s first two syllables, and in its completion of the wider soundscape of but-/cat-/set-.

Another subtle haiku from the booklet deserves examination:

autumn wedding
the dull sky
whiter in the lake ¹⁹

The monosyllabic abruptness of the middle line, and what appears to be an insinuation about the happy couple, leave the reader with much to do. The third line intrigues even further. Again, I must emphasise the musicality of Gourlay’s writing, in the sonic similarity between the first syllables of lines one and three. It’s also worth considering her use of articles. That ‘the’ before ‘dull sky’ could be an ‘a’, or the line could be article-less; but it’s a fair guess to wonder if Gourlay plumped for ‘the’ to imply a sense of impending joyless permanence to the couple’s marriage. Maybe the wedding just wasn’t very jolly.

That rat haiku aside, there is a good case for judging *Lull Before Dark* as Gourlay’s masterpiece, and, further, that it’s as fine a collection as any yet published by a British haiku poet. By and large, the poems are sparer than in her other collections, and transmit a close, almost mystical, attentiveness to the world around her and a psychological depth which is rarely overt yet always perceptible.

my mother—
after her death
her silence ²⁰

newborn baby
fragile as eggshell
the blue sky ²¹

At opposite ends of the spectrum of life, these two poems have a fresh simplicity which strikes a middle way between Minimalism and the sort of epigram-like poems which are unaccountably popular today. The mother haiku says all that needs to be

said about absence: of personality, wisdom, knowledge and, above all, the complexity of love. The repetition of ‘her’ is deeply felt, and the em-dash provides half a second’s pause to fine effect. The baby haiku says so much about time and the journey of life. As the reader it’s hard not to double-take at what seems to be a hinge line in the middle, as if the sky itself is as fragile as the newborn. The poem’s sparseness is enhanced by the omission of an ‘as’ before ‘fragile’ and emphasises that word to give a rhyme-of-sorts with ‘eggshell’. One can also picture the baby’s head as egg-like, its fontanelle exposed and vulnerable.

I could go on, but I’ll close with more treasure from *Lull Before Dark*:

in drenching rain	unopened letter—
two young girls without coats	a kestrel hovers
eat wild raspberries ²²	in the distance ²³

In the first of these, we can feel the downpour and the girls’ triumphant indifference to it. Moreover, we share the simple, joyful sweetness provided by the rain-washed wayside raspberries. It’s a scene full of life; one of those haiku which looks as though the words fell straight into place without any need for polishing. The second is more mysterious, like a painting by Vermeer. The reader must mentally bridge the gap between the two images; perhaps intuit that the letter is likely to bring bad news.

That Caroline Gourlay was equally adept at writing haiku with unadorned immediacy and those which have a slow-burning resonance will be obvious to all those who know and appreciate them. Hers was a distinctive voice which is much missed. I hope this essay will bring new readers to her substantial, pioneering achievement.

Matthew Paul

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- ¹ For 12 issues, from 8/1 in 1998 until 10/4 in 2000.
- ² Issue 5/4, August 1995.
- ³ Email to author, 7 August, 2016.
- ⁴ *Crossing the Field*, unpaginated.
- ⁵ *Wing Beats*, ed. John Barlow and Matthew Paul, Snapshot Press, 2008.
- ⁶ *Reading All Night*, unpaginated.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ *Stepping Stones*, p.155.
- ⁹ *Reading All Night*, unpaginated.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ *Stepping Stones*, p.121.
- ¹⁵ *Lull Before Dark*, p.37.
- ¹⁶ *Reading All Night*, unpaginated.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ *Through the Café Door*, p.8.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p.27
- ²⁰ *Lull Before Dark*, p.22
- ²¹ Ibid., p.24
- ²² Ibid., p.27
- ²³ Ibid., p.48