

## *Editors' Choices*

Chris Arthur. *Irish Haiku*.

Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group Publishers, 2005.

“Essays are a radically independent form, giving no allegiance to particular discipline or procedure,” writes Chris Arthur in the third volume of his essay trilogy. “They go their own way in whatever manner they consider appropriate. They tolerate, indeed celebrate, the fragmentary.” Thomas E. Kennedy, in a 2005 *TLR* review, wrote of Arthur’s second volume (*Irish Willow*): “Mr. Arthur compares the essay form with that of the haiku in several important features. But just as haikus, despite their brevity, can hardly be consumed like popcorn, these essays are best read slowly, contemplatively.” An accurate assessment of a book that can be picked up in any mood and flipped through for the words you’re looking to speak to you at the moment.

What we have in *Irish Haiku* is a supreme distillation of themes that consume Arthur: time (past, present, future), memory, and language. Of these, it is language that is celebrated in these pages:

All I can say in my defence is that the task of the writer is to keep on looking for words that will fit, particularly in situations where the nature of things seems to throw off everything we try on, exploding all our attempted fits with a sense of something essentially wild and naked which none of our approximations can hope to clad for long. Were something to seem a perfect fit, I fear it could be due only to a failure of vision . . . .”

In the essay “Witness” Arthur attempts to bring us history, memory, and the present moment at once: “The bookshop was haunted by pet shop memories that were sufficiently potent to intrude their images into the present. Alongside the smell of books was the well-remembered dusty aroma of the Hessian sacks of meal and seed that used to sit on the floor . . . where the history section was, there used to be tanks of fish . . .” The author is incapable of blocking out what was, despite what is in front of him now. Nothing is *just* what is in the present moment. Yet, this is the aim of the haiku—to grasp exactly what is here at the moment. This conundrum

somewhat explains the contradictory nature of these essays. Like haiku, they challenge our intellect in so far as we find our thoughts flip-flopping in their conclusions of where Arthur is trying to take us.

In “How to See a Horse” Arthur quotes Jean Cocteau as saying that poetry “takes off the veil,” that it “reveals the amazing things which surround us and which our senses usually register mechanically.” This begins to get to the crux of what Arthur is obsessed with—bringing to the reader’s conscious mind what we know instinctively, because we have been there before; our history is informing our present.

In “Beginning by Blackbird” Arthur explains that the intent of the *haiku* form is, at least according to Zen Buddhism, seeing what’s here, right now, in front of us . . . “haiku can cut like scalpels to the heart of perception . . .” Haikus, Arthur believes, are essentially about insight and realization. Arthur conveys this aching precision in the final essay “Swan Song” in which he writes about the upcoming birth of his son, his wife’s full belly; feeling and watching the child still invisible form behind her flesh. And then—the child is born—dead. The question that so perplexes Arthur is not how to finally put this experience into words—but rather the question posed by others: If the child was born dead, having never taken a breath, does that make the experience less horrific than if the child had been born, taken a breath, and then died?

For those who asked this question, a stillbirth was seen as far less traumatic, almost as if it didn’t count. In their view it meant that Boll had never really been. As such, we’d not lost anyone and so it simply didn’t matter much, certainly not on the same scale as it would have done if, say, he’d drawn breath and lived for—well, I’m not sure how long would have been needed for him to have qualified for membership for the other constituency of loss: a few minutes, an hour, days, weeks, years? . . . He was seen as not quite human, so not deserving of full-scale grief.

Arthur can never put the memory—back there—wherever *there* is. He seems to be asking: How do we integrate horrendous loss and move on without being permanently broken?

I have one photograph of Jane, heavily pregnant with Boll, standing in the tropical ravine in Belfast's Botanical Gardens, only a stone's throw from the Museum with the then undiscovered talisman of the swan-wing burial at Vedbaek. In the amber of that moment Boll was alive . . . Now, whenever we pause and smile to camera, he is not there, and still he is not there and never will be with us. So every family photo now contains the invisible ghost of his absence. And I know we are forever diminished by his loss . . .

Writers have struggled (and continue to struggle) with past and present but Arthur, through painstaking description and insisting on the correct words, phrases and sentences, manages to nail this mercurial phenomenon. "Nothing is discontinuous, separate, enclosed in the integrity of its own impermeable boundaries . . ." asserts Arthur ("Water-Glass"). He continues: ". . . Are the dandelions that grow in those few derelict gardens in Bachelors' Walk direct-line descendants of the ones that grew in all the grassy margins of the town in the summer of 1690 when Schomberg and William's armies converged there for their march to the Boyne?"

A good book of essays is enjoyable, in part, because essays tend to be of a certain length—we understand the time dimension before we open the book. We also (if the essay is good) anticipate coming away from the experience—provoked emotionally, intellectually, politically. Good essayists know how to grab the reader immediately—they understand the importance of the essay's boundaries. An agreement exists between reader and writer based on the essay form.

Arthur brings us into his world (primarily his Protestant upbringing in Lisburn, County Antrim, Ireland) via these moments in "essay" time and humbly asks that we allow him entry into our individual inner landscapes. He pardons himself while, with a surgeon's skill, he moves the reader's emotional sinews to reach the fleshy core—as it truly is, not as we might like it to be—and leaves us turning the pages of *Irish Haiku* in our minds—even after we've put down the book.

*Madeleine Beckman*