

“Do Not Be Anxious...”

by Richard Straw¹

Not asking their names,
not trying to remember:
wildflowers.

Why single this poem out as a “favorite haiku”? It’s unknown to most readers and has attracted very few admirers, yet with each encounter it quietly coaxes me to slow down a second and experience the haiku way of perception. In it, I can overhear the author, James T. Luguri, as he struggles to focus on *just one thing, now* (“wildflowers”), while ignoring distractions from *without, in the future* (“not asking their names”), and from *within, in the past* (“not trying to remember”). His language of flowers is one of nonattachment and differs completely from the elaborate Victorian florigraphy that florists once foisted on the lovelorn and the “lovetorn.”² Luguri wants to forget all that and more in order to return himself and his readers to Adam’s prelapsarian garden, to a time and state before all the names were handed out. Through his eyes, we, too, can be with wildflowers as they truly are, living beings within a blooming creation. The “dearest freshness deep down things”³ doesn’t carry the baggage of botanical, symbolic, or mythological labels. It shines instead like “shook foil,” revealing an unnameable God-stamped identity.

This haiku way of perception for James Luguri complemented his religious way of life and his vocation as a teacher of classes on the Bible, Dante, and Shakespeare. In addition to haiku, he wrote longer poems, aphorisms, and expository essays and criticism, most of which were unpublished in his lifetime. He died on April 23, 1985, at age 38 of a heart attack that he suffered while jogging. A collection of his haiku was published in 1987 by Peter Luguri and Gregory Martin in *To Make a World: One Hundred Haiku and One Waka*.⁴ According to a one-paragraph biography in the back of this posthumously published book, James Luguri was “a native of Lindenhurst, Long Island,” who

left home at the age of thirteen to enter a Carmelite community. After ten years he left the order and completed his education in Berkeley, California, receiving advanced degrees at the Graduate Theological Union and the University of California. A teacher by profession, he taught at various institutions and at various levels, from junior high through graduate school and adult education. His principal forms of expression were haiku and aphorism, although he also wrote many longer poems and translated several works of Rainer Maria Rilke...At the time of his death he was on the faculty of the Franciscan School of Theology, in Berkeley, teaching in the area of theology and the arts, and also on the faculty of the Department of Religious Studies at St. Mary’s College, Moraga.

¹ Prepared for the April 30, 2011, North Carolina Haiku Society’s 32nd annual Haiku Holiday at Bolin Brook Farm, Chapel Hill. Attendees were asked to bring “one favorite haiku on a 3 x 5 card. . .by someone other than yourself.”

² “In the early 1700’s, Lady Mary Wortley Montague, an Englishwoman living in Constantinople, popularized the Turkish custom of using the language of flowers in love letters to her sweetheart back home. By the late 1700’s, numerous ‘flower dictionaries’ had been published across England. With the dawn of the Victorian era in the early 1800’s, flowers were the acceptable way to communicate heartfelt feelings that would otherwise go unspoken.” For more details, see <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/macon/palette/>, among many other online resources.

³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur” (<http://www.bartleby.com/122/7.html>).

⁴ *To Make a World: One Hundred Haiku and One Waka*. Berkeley, CA: Gregory Martin, 1987. A PDF of this book is available at <https://www.thehaikufoundation.org/omeka/items/show/52>. See #23 for the “Not asking their names” haiku.

John E. McEntyre, a colleague of Luguri's at Saint Mary's College of California, wrote a brief appreciative essay titled "James Luguri's Haiku" that was published in *The Christian Century*.⁵ McEntyre starts by noting that Robert Aitken Roshi, the renowned American Zen master and haiku student and friend of R.H. Blyth, once described Luguri as "the best haiku poet in English and possibly in any tongue." Then he supports that assertion by quoting several of Luguri's haiku as he summarizes succinctly the main features of Luguri's approach. Here are a few points that McEntyre makes:

- "Haiku, the briefest form of poetry, embody the Japanese and Franciscan virtue of simplicity with a deceptive grace and eloquence. Luguri's haiku, like his life, show that the last will be first, that the least detail is already greatest."
- "Luguri's haiku make concrete the Christian doctrine of incarnation, showing how extraordinary everyday reality is. His poems do not discuss theological doctrine, they embody it; or in the language more common to Zen, they 'realize' the doctrine, en flesh it, bring it into being. Simultaneously, ordinary life springs out at the reader in all its freshness."
- "In an age of anxiety and cynicism, Luguri's haiku remind us of the innocence of childhood, informed by a vision of completeness, wholeness and perfection."

I've been unable to locate and read any of James Luguri's essays and aphorisms, but fortunately John McEntyre includes snippets from one essay, lecture, or letter on haiku that Luguri wrote:

Haiku do not communicate "enlightenment"; they do not communicate at all unless they manage to remind us that we have already been enlightened and often enough—only in ways so ordinary that we never imagined they could count for anything. A good haiku makes us realize we were wrong. . . . Unlike much western poetry, haiku by and large leave the alas unsaid. So Shiki's "A poppy bloomed / and in the same day's wind / fell and was scattered." Here is no lament, no *lacrimae rerum*,⁶ not even an insistence on inevitable loss: just this flower, just this wind, just their mutual movements.

Haiku writing for Luguri was clearly *not* a scientific exercise or even a literary pursuit. He probably would have agreed that a good haiku isn't attained by getting the correct names of things down on paper and into a reader's head, although he occasionally *did* employ the common names of garden flowers and various flora and fauna in his 99 other haiku! The act of writing for him was something more like an arrow prayer of gratitude, a brief record of a fortuitous moment, a modest nod after a nudge from the eternal. Haiku's purpose for him wasn't didacticism, persuasion, or confession. It was a chaste revealing of his heart. Serendipity is a hallmark of his and all good haiku, something not to be strived for *at all*, but accepted openly as a gift from a child, like grace. His poems are the remains of his least self's husk. When reading Luguri's haiku on "Not asking their names," and for that matter, when reading many of his other poems, it's difficult not to recall that familiar passage from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.⁷

⁵ *The Christian Century*, Volume 104, Number 17, May 20-27, 1987, pp. 486-488.

⁶ A famous phrase from Virgil's *Aeneid* that translates as "the tears of things, the tears at the heart of things, the tragedy of life" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lacrimae%20rerum>).

⁷ Matthew 6:25-29, Revised Standard Version (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/r/rsv/>).

More Poems from James Luguri's *To Make a World: One Hundred Haiku and One Waka*

The narcissus opens:
nothing to believe,
nothing to doubt.

*Spring sun
in the pinetree: the least needle
glistens.*⁸

Staring and staring
at the stream: something I can't see
keeps making ripples.

*Between every rung
of the rusted fire-escape
blue sky.*

Sparrows
pass through fence links
like nothing.

*Thin kite strings
connect a handful of children
with the sky.*

Walking among
these pines, even my shadow
disappears.

*In the only tall grass
left still to mow, the mower
having his lunch.*

Silent flowers
grow even more quiet
as evening falls.

*Autumn evening:
calling out "I'm home!"
to find an empty house.*

An instant
after landing, the leaf appears
never to have fallen.

⁸ Note that Luguri sometimes adds an additional pause (i.e., punctuation) in the middle of the second line, something not done very often by other haiku poets. It's a technique that others might imitate as a way to slow and calm readers down.

Old photographs:
how I long to know my parents
before I was born.⁹

*All Souls Day:
helping up my mother
from her mother's grave.*

Far down the road:
to see my father's face
I must hurry.

*We stand parting:
the winter wind whips my words
back into my face.*

Fresh snow covering
everything: tiny birds with
not a thing in mind.

*Winter moonlight:
shadows of these lobster traps grow
large enough to hold me.*

Full winter moon:
this dead tree and I are made
to share a shadow.

*Winter midnight walk:
a steady white breathing
of me and of stars.*

Afternoons lengthen:
from somewhere a buzzing saw
sounds unhurried.

*A crocus or two
through the icy window:
faces in a dream.*

To become detached,
only consider the tiny
green caterpillar
grown content to make a world
of one swaying grassblade.

⁹ Titled "Autumn," this haiku first appeared in *Modern Haiku*, Volume XI, Number 3, autumn 1980, p. 18.