

The Whisper I Wished For, by Lee Gurga (Champaign, Ill.: Modern Haiku Press, 2025). 78 pages; 5" × 7". Matte grey card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-9741894-1-3. Price: \$12.00 from www.modernhaiku.org

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The thought process leading to a poet's work often remains interior to the poet. So it is a singular contribution that Lee Gurga makes in his most recent haiku collection, *the whisper I wished for. the whisper I wished for: selected ku* is a sampling of haiku across the range of styles Gurga has explored in the last twenty-five years. It is also an acknowledgement of the aesthetic writings that have informed his work. The collection is something of an x-ray of Gurga's poetic thought-journey over the last quarter century and affords a glimpse into the mind of a significant figure in English-language haiku. The award-winning author of several solo haiku collections and the much-read *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*, Gurga is also a translator of Japanese haiku, a haiku essayist, the editor of a number of landmark haiku anthologies, a former editor of *Modern Haiku* journal, and a past president of the Haiku Society of America.

Gurga has been open about his haiku path. In the introduction to *the whisper I wished for*, Gurga summarizes the key stylistic challenges he has grappled with on his journey from haiku explorations of "season and wonder" to "a period of increased experimentation with image and form." In his earlier essay "Normative Haiku and Beyond," he describes his journey from writing what he terms "normative" haiku to writing poems on "the next level."¹ Gurga defines "normative" haiku as a short poem usually in three lines and featuring a seasonal reference and internal comparison of two juxtaposed images.

In the name of elucidating "what we might do to get to the next level beyond normative haiku," Gurga offers an outline of his own experience doing just that, informed by key critical writings on haiku.² Along the way, Gurga was also influenced by the critical writings of Shigehisa Kuriyama, Koji Kawamoto, Vicente Huidobro, and Viktor Schklovsky, some of which extend well beyond the scope of haiku and Japanese verse.

Quotes from these authors introduce the four sections of poems in *the whisper I wished for*, and the poems themselves flesh out the outline Gurga presents in his earlier essay. The book's first two sections draw on critical writings specific to haiku and touching on fundamentals of haiku aesthetics and craft. A quotation from Shigehisa Kuriyama's thoughts on the function of seasonality in haiku opens the first section. Prefacing the second section is a quotation from Koji Kawamoto's *The Poetics of Japanese Verse* summarizing his functional distinction between the "base section" (i.e. phrase) and "superposed section" (i.e. fragment) of a haiku.³

Opening the collection's third and fourth sections are quotations that explore poetics beyond the realm of haiku and introduce in those sections haiku of greater formal complexity and emotional depth. A quotation, about the concrete and the abstract in poetry, from twentieth-century Chilean poet and critic Vicente Huidobro's essay "Creationism" opens the third section. Preceding the fourth section is a quote from Russian/Soviet formalist critic Viktor Schklovsky's noted essay "Art as Technique," declaring the purpose of art "to impart the sensation of things as they are" and the technique of art as "to increase the difficulty and length of perception" because "the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself."

As a signpost for the stylistic journey that unfolds over the course of the book, Gurga might profitably have quoted from an earlier passage in Huidobro's "Creationism," in which the author defines his idea of the "created poem" or "creationist poem" as an invented world of "cosmogonic proportions:"

It renders real that which doesn't exist; that is to say, it makes its own reality. It creates the marvelous and gives it a life of its own. It creates extraordinary situations which could never exist in truth ... Created poems acquire cosmogonic proportions ... The creationist poem is comprised of created images, created situations, created concepts; it neither lacks nor dispenses with a single element of traditional poetry, only here those elements are all invented without the least concern for what is real, nor for any truth anterior to the act of their realization.

The implications for haiku are clear. In a genre that, since the time of Shiki, has given primacy to poetic expressions of "haiku moments"

rendered in poetic images drawn from “objective reality,” Huidobro’s idea of the created poem offers an aesthetic justification and a path forward for poets working in all genres to give voice to ideas that “could never exist in truth” in ways that take their poems out of the ordinary and into the “extraordinary” and the “marvelous.”

The poems in *the whisper I wished for* essentially outline a stylistic path and underlying aesthetic contexts from concrete-realist haiku to those that present new expressive possibilities in imagined realities of Gurga’s own invention.

Shigehisa Kuriyama’s assertion that the “true evocative function” of seasonality in haiku is “to expand the scope” of a haiku and create “a background of associations” for scenes in poems introduces the poems in the collection’s first section. These poems are rationally understandable and feature an array of seasonal references. And like the seasonal references in many published traditional haiku, some of Gurga’s (e.g., “All Hallow’s Eve,” “midday heat,” “dog days”) are common haiku clichés. In each instance, however, Gurga redeems the well-worn haiku expression with unexpected juxtaposed images or new takes on familiar ideas.

In his “when yes” haiku, Gurga turns the expression “when no means yes” on its head in the first two lines, adding an element of the traditional haiku aesthetic of *karumi*—lightness—to an expression that would otherwise indicate a serious subject:

when yes
means yes:
spring peepers

The common haiku image “spring peepers” appears as the poem’s punchline and, by implication, places the consensual human sexual experience within nature’s constant cycles of reproduction.

Another well-worn haiku seasonal reference appears in the opening of this poem:

winter solitude
finding a shallow dish
for my molars

A dentist by profession, Gurga makes the poem interesting with an inventive way of expressing what is likely a common experience: removing one's dental bridge, perhaps at night before retiring to bed. But the poem's greater interest comes from the disjuncture created by juxtaposing the search for the dish with "winter solitude." Increasingly over the course of Gurga's collection, disjuncture created by *kire* (cut or cutting) becomes bolder and more adventuresome, and the poems' ways of speaking more nuanced and enigmatic. The result for the reader—as Schklovsky theorized—is a lengthening of the time it takes to make sense, however conceived, of the poems.

Prefaced by the quotation from Koji Kawamoto's *The Poetics of Japanese Verse*, the poems in the collection's second section begin to explore juxtapositions of concrete images and ideas beyond the rational that lead the reader into unknown terrain and novel and mysterious thoughtspaces beyond the concrete world.⁴ Language evokes a mythic space of deep mystery in this poem:

touching
the other door
blue asters

The tendency is to try to derive rational meaning from the haiku, to make it "mean." But this poem's language, though full of concrete images, is secretive. "Touching" is grounded in the physical world, then line 2 reveals the object of that verb—"the other door," suggesting Alice right before she opens the small or large door in Wonderland. Maybe the reader *is* Alice, who, Lewis Carroll tells us, is too large to pass through the small door and can't move the large door, thwarted in every direction.

If the speaker—or the reader—were to enter through "the other door" in Gurga's poem, where would it lead? If not to Wonderland, the "other door" might suggest a portal to somewhere else even more magical. The "blue asters" in line 3 evoke a rich mythology that offers some tantalizing clues. In one reading of the myth, when human beings turn cruel, the ancient Greek goddess Astraea leaves her earthly dwelling and ascends into the cosmos. The tears she weeps fall to Earth and land as blue asters.

In a different version, *Astraea* scatters stardust, and blue asters bloom where it lands on Earth. The flower is, thus, connected with the celestial sphere, far beyond Earth and its physical, psychological, and emotional gravity.

There is a ready-made mythic and psychological landscape in which this poem could reside. Still, the poem is mysterious: “the other door”—what other door? What’s behind it? Where does it lead? The poem’s mysterious language suggests the door is closed—so, should we open it? Or would some harm come of it?⁵ Ironically, the cut between the door and the asters teeters on the verge of being too large to make connections between the two images, and that volatility is a good part of what makes the poem deliciously ungraspable. The ancient Greek oracles spoke in cryptic prophecies whose interpretation was the exclusive province of the priests. Gurga’s poem hides behind its own door, resisting a definitive reading. In the end, we must allow the poem to speak its own language, and to be content to revel in explorations of a thoughtspace not bound by exhaustive interpretation. We must respect the poem’s privacy.

This poem, too, begs to be read on its own mysterious terms:

carrying nowhere
out of moonlight
blue damselfly

In language full of concrete images, Gurga’s haiku leaves the reader in a wondrous landscape of umbrous glow. The impossible idea of “carrying nowhere” joins, in line 2, with the even more impossible idea of “carrying nowhere / *out of moonlight*” (emphasis added), paradoxically inventing a new reality. The magical blue of the “blue damselfly” in line 3—a well-worn seasonal reference—brings with it the essential mystery of moonlight: it glows electric in the mind’s eye but doesn’t illuminate anything completely. Like moonlight, which veils Earth in a kind of nowhere that is everywhere, the ubiquitous damselfly floats in for a few weeks, mates, then vanishes into the ineffable nowhere at the end of the life cycle. The poem’s images layer up a psychospiritual chiaroscuro of glimpses through the half-light of the physical world and worlds beyond.

A quotation from Vicente Huidobro's manifesto "Creationism" opens the third section of *the whisper I wished for*: "The abstract should become concrete," Huidobro writes, "and the concrete should become abstract." The haiku in this section use "concrete" images to subvert expected syntax, semantic reason, and rational understanding. The poems also exploit the disjunctive power of *kire* to create multiple temporal and psychological image-worlds in which the poems simultaneously reside.

In Gurga's "hilltop cemetery," unusual language performs the imagined metamorphosis that language itself might undergo between the realms of the living and the dead, intertwining the poem's process with its meaning:

hilltop cemetery
touching another world
with my tongue

To stand on or near a grave and speak out loud to the occupant is to attempt to send earthly language to the vast unknown. Line 1 conjures a concrete image of headstones clustered on the brow of a hill. The cut after "hilltop" jumps to a phrasal section—"touching another world / with my tongue"—where spoken language leaps from the world of the living to the world beyond in lexical choices verging on the ritualistic. Line 2 begins with what at first suggests a cliché, but in line 3, we learn that the tongue, not the hand, is "touching" the other world by way of speech. "Touching" transforms from a tactile to a figurative or even metaphysical meaning, as the utterances at the grave swirl like incense smoke through the veil between living and dead. Gurga's written language describes the spell the poetic speaker utters to send messages beyond our known world to the most mysterious world of all.

In another cemetery haiku, Gurga explores life, death, and the power of *kire* to enable a poem to transcend rational possibility:

wren song mending my epitaph

This poem, too, defies rational understanding if read purely literally. Emphasizing the cut after "song" raises these questions: What does it

mean to mend one's own epitaph? How might one go about doing it? Read the poem as though there were no cut after "song," though, and another question arises: how might wren song, specifically, mend an epitaph? On a literal level, all of these things are impossible in our world.

A figurative reading of "mending," however, attributes redemptive agency to birds and, by extension, all of nature. This reading conjures images of a cemetery quiet but for a shower of wren song magically giving voice to the chorus of final words silenced forever in stone. In Gurga's poem, life and death, history and eternity are all stacked up in an instant.

"The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." With this quote from Viktor Schklovsky, Gurga begins the fourth and final section of his collection. Here the haiku bear the mark of Schklovsky's theory of defamiliarization as poems made intriguing by way of strange ideas and modes of expression. These haiku show Gurga at his most adventuresome, energizing common idioms in novel lexical contexts and expanding the possibilities of traditional haiku form in inventive graphical disposition on the page.

In "after all," the common idiom that begins the poem takes on devastating weight in light of the poem's second part:

after all a child's ashes

The image of a child's physical remains lends sorrowful gravitas to "after all," an expression commonly used to send home points that are sensible or obvious—*you'd better study; after all, the test is tomorrow*. The poem's opening is a visceral reminder that a child's death lies outside the normal order of things, a tragedy from which no sense can be made.

Language interrogates its own pliability in this section in a number of poems that radically depart from the usual three- or one-line form of English-language haiku. "without syntax," the title poem of Gurga's recent chapbook entirely devoted to haiku in non-traditional graphical forms, is emblematic of his formal explorations:

without
syntax

the
bare
skin

of
dawn

Leading the eye down, instead of up, the page, even as the dawning light in the haiku moves up the sky, the poem's visual arrangement walks the reader through a natural phenomenon upended in a world in which the typical earthly order of things—including the expected word order of syntax—does not exist. Dawn thus speaks a language beyond language, embodied in a way that, in a world without linguistic order, undoes its own explication. The haiku instructs the reader to take it on its own terms.

The collection's title poem, "mistflower," is a "marvelous" and extraordinary" created world in the manner of Huidobro's idea of the "created poem." Here, invented images, enveloping sounds, and explorative form combine in a profoundly intimate sensory experience.

mistflower

the
whisper

I
wished
for

The poem's opening image transports us to a magic garden of Gurga's own invention. The ethereal image of "mistflower" is full of mystery—a flower maybe in the mist, though perhaps better, a flower *made* of the

fine, fragile stuff of mist. This created image even enables us to imagine that we ourselves are those flowers in a moist gossamer embrace.

The short *i* sound runs through the poem, connecting “mistflower” with “whisper,” and “wished”—two more images from the heart’s core. The language of this garden of magical mistflowers is the gauzy, tender touch of whispers, verbal caresses subtle as the tiniest beads of mist, and satisfying the deepest yearnings of desire.

Though contemporary English-language haiku gives pride of place to poems in traditional, concrete-realist style, the genre in actuality encompasses a wide range of styles. Gurga’s *the whisper I wished for* shows a haiku poet working across the full stylistic spectrum, from traditional/concrete-realist haiku to those boldly explorative in poetic idea and form, and informed by aesthetic influences from writings well beyond the scope of haiku.⁶ The collection is, thus, poetically rich and also important. It offers a rare glimpse of the thought processes underpinning the artistic growth of a poet of note. Even more importantly, *the whisper I wished for* is a compendium of possibilities—what English-language haiku and the poets who write in this genre can, with breadth of reading and depth of thought, become.

NOTES

¹ Gurga, Lee. “Normative Haiku and Beyond,” *Modern Haiku* 52.2, 2021, 31-44. One could legitimately take issue with the implicit value judgement in designating traditional or concrete-realist haiku “normative.” The label implicitly defines haiku of that style as constituting the haiku “center” and, by implication, brands haiku outside that style as peripheral—abnormal, aberrant, eccentric, flawed. In this review, “traditional” and/or “concrete-realist,” however imperfect as descriptors, will be used synonymously with “normative.”

² Those writings are: Shirane, Haruo. *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Bashō*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998; Gilbert, Richard. “The Disjunctive Dragonfly,” *Modern Haiku* 35.1, 2004; *The Disjunctive Dragonfly: A New Approach to English-language Haiku*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2013; and *Poems of Consciousness: Contemporary Japanese and English-Language Haiku in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2008;

and Lucas, Martin. “Haiku As Poetic Spell,” presentation delivered at the fourth Haiku Pacific Rim Conference in Terrigal, Australia, September 2009, published at <https://www.thehaikufoundation.org/omeka/index.php/items/show/519>.

³ Kawamoto, Koji. Trans. Stephen Collington, Kevin Collins, and Gustav Heldt. *The Poetics of Japanese Verse*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2000, also cited in Gurga, “Normative Haiku and Beyond,” 32.

⁴ For a discussion of his concept of thoughtspace in English-language haiku, see Gilbert, Richard. *Haiku. Language. Thought: Creative Freedom Through Space of Mind*. Champaign, IL: Modern Haiku Press, 2025.

⁵ For a discussion of language going silent and thwarting communication in English translations of contemporary Japanese haiku, see Hambrick, Jennifer. “Found in Translation: The Kon Nichi Translation Group, *Gendai* Haiku, and the Rise of Avant-Garde Haiku in English,” in *Juxtapositions: Research and Scholarship in Haiku*, Issue 10, 2024, 19-104.

⁶ See Miller, Paul. “Haiku’s American Frontier,” *The Haiku Foundation Digital Library*, <https://thehaikufoundation.org/omeka/items/show/682>, and discussed in Hambrick, “Found in Translation,” 85, n. 83. Accessed 15 Nov. 2025.