



ALL EARS

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Haikai-
No-
Renga

Keith Abbott
Pat Nolan
Maureen Owen
Michael Sowl



Empty Head Press
2004

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ALL EARS



Commentary
by the Poets



*All Ears
Sequence*

ALL EARS

After rain the freeze
gnawing at the wall
hands over heater all ears

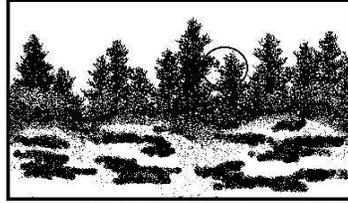
after rain the freeze
gnawing at the wall
hands over heater all ears
leaves cut into a steel sky
or the gray in photographs

leaves cut into a steel sky
or the gray in photographs
when we started we
knew the sun was at our backs
that's all we knew

when we started we
knew the sun was at our backs
that's all we knew
such a strange bird call no
only a crowbar stubborn nail

such a strange bird call no
only a crowbar stubborn nail
a tree gets a shave
take my word for it moon-cut
razor strop cold snap

a tree gets a shave
take my word for it moon-cut
razor strop cold snap
morning's frost warmed to froth
mist beards a fir studded hillside



morning's frost warmed to froth
mist beards a fir studded hillside
front door opens
and all the hall doors open, too --
drafts and vacuums rule

front door opens
and all the hall doors open, too --
drafts and vacuums rule
old men's still raging hatred --
"time don't do shit for some wounds"

old men's still raging hatred --
"time don't do shit for some wounds"
mild late winter
many strange birds pass through
Adventists go door to door

mild late winter
many strange birds pass through
Adventists go door to door
shirt sleeves rolled back to elbows
whose arms emerge like white fish?

shirt sleeves rolled back to elbows
whose arms emerge like white fish?
blue ocean calm blue
ocean calm blue ocean
calm blue ocean calm

blue ocean calm blue
ocean calm blue ocean
calm blue ocean calm
out my window fountain and
rain sounds separate then blur

out my window fountain and
rain sounds separate then blur
all bets are off now
we talk late into the hour
no one knows us here

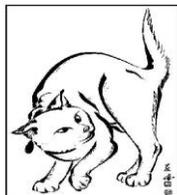
all bets are off now
we talk late into the hour
no one knows us here
a crowd of dead leaves and
their shadows wait to be let in

a crowd of dead leaves and
their shadows wait to be let in
for years the neighbor's house
seemed abandoned desolate --
their first grandchild

for years the neighbor's house
seemed abandoned desolate --
their first grandchild
forget-me-nots everywhere
I can't believe you're not here

forget-me-nots everywhere
I can't believe you're not here
are you still yelling
about those tickets, Blanche?
sky blue with yellow eyes

are you still yelling
about those tickets, Blanche?
sky blue with yellow eyes
what a mess -- who expects the cat
to read a Wet Paint sign



what a mess -- who expects the cat
to read a Wet Paint sign
Cairo video
"What's the sound of one million
swarming Egyptians?"

Cairo video
"What's the sound of one million
swarming Egyptians?"
a blackened nail turning
over and over in the soil

a blackened nail turning
over and over in the soil
bare feet on cold tiles
peek out at morning
leaves plastered to damp pavement

bare feet on cold tiles
peek out at morning
leaves plastered to damp pavement
arms at each side of your head
I've been in love all night now

arms at each side of your head
I've been in love all night now
a huge firefly
wicky wacky wicky wacky wicky
passes by

a huge firefly
wicky wacky wicky wacky wicky
passes by
warning -- keep all body parts
out of window openings

warning -- keep all body parts
out of window openings
frequently the crowds
were so thick a car halted
horn vainly bleating

frequently the crowds
were so thick a car halted
horn vainly bleating
each night a new figure's
added to the Nativity scene

each night a new figure's
added to the Nativity scene
now in winter
it's always the same river
flowing nowhere fast

now in winter
it's always the same river
flowing nowhere fast
nah, you shouldna mailed them bills --
we're flat broke until the first

nah, you shouldna mailed them bills --
we're flat broke until the first
too wet to view the moon
rain veined window reflects
her tear streaked likeness

too wet to view the moon
rain veined window reflects
her tear streaked likeness
sound of a car door slamming
just someone who lives nearby



sound of a car door slamming
just someone who lives nearby
distracted he asks
the empty bus driver's seat
for directions

distracted he asks
the empty bus driver's seat
for directions
volleys taps flag folded
ceremony for a plain man

volleys taps flag folded
ceremony for a plain man
the puppy howled
into the neighbors' front rooms
crepuscular songs

the puppy howled
into the neighbors' front rooms
crepuscular songs
easy quiet way of chi
snowflake's wet kisses eyelash

easy quiet way of chi
snowflake's wet kisses eyelash
sumacs run crimson
river of hawks cuts the ridge
what more needs telling?

sumacs run crimson
river of hawks cuts the ridge
what more needs telling?
on this fresh black asphalt
shadows of power lines, of smoke

3/22/93



All Ears was composed through the mail over a period of a year and a half. Once the 36 stanzas of the haikai-no-renga were completed, each poet was asked to comment on the process in general, and on their own stanzas and those of their collaborators.

COMMENTARY
BY THE
POETS

ALL EARS COMMENTARY

Keith Abbott: I liked the noise levels in All Ears. And the range of emotions shown throughout the poem. And the way, as Pat remarked, all my collaborators altruistically tried to end the poem for me. I think the passage of links from 15 to 19 are as wonderfully complicated and various as any I've ever seen. It was inspiring to read these improvisations by my collaborators. It reminded me of a really tight jazz ensemble passage. Maureen's flower stanza was especially wonderful, opening up what had been somber wintry imagery to summer, love, and humor.

Michael Sowl: Most impressed with Maureen's #5 (a tree gets a shave), Pat's #21 (bare feet on cold tiles) and Keith's #20 (a blackened nail turning) as free-standing stanzas. Like the linkage, also between 20/21. And Maureen's 30 (sound of a car door slamming) to Pat's 29 (too wet to view the moon). And Keith's answering the question with smoke and shadow in the ageku.

Maureen Owen: Thought it was wonderful the way Pat took the last stanza of mine ("the puppy howled") and carried it into the great center of being, Chi and nature's gentleness. Reminding us of the natural order of birth and death and the calm of it, the true understanding. Also the difference of the view the East takes vs. the view the West takes. And then Michael's lovely hit of nature keeping the connection and then Keith taking it back into the city, the congestion and pollution, but also keeping the line taut by addressing the urban as a modern day natural phase of life.

Pat Nolan: Keith is right about the jazz-like quality of the links; those were some of the squarest, most brilliant corners I've ever looked around. Each stanza linking with the following stanza created a unique five-line poem. That they appear in sequence contributes to the illusion of a plot. There is no plot, only narrative, lyric narrative. Maureen, however, deserves the credit for adding a quality that the old fogies hadn't dared broach: love. Romance is a very important aspect of any renku. Stanza 18 and 35, the second flower stanza, speak for themselves.



The Stanzas

"After rain the freeze"

Hokeku. On winter nights when the temperature drops below freezing, my little room is a source of heat. Nothing like little animals trying to chew their way in to get your attention. PN

"leaves cut into a steel sky"

Waki. Standing in the yard as a storm moves in. The roiling clouds in ten thousand shades of gray. Noticing the way the leaves jag out in relief against the gray and that darkening, thinking of black & white photographs and those levels of gray with objects sharp, knife-like, everything so clear and definite. Suddenly so full of power. MO

"when we started we"

Trying to follow a moose track in the former Laurentian Mountains (now hills) -- we got lost -- and then "found" ourselves

by walking toward the Sun. Basic Celestial Navigation. MS

"such a strange bird call no"

I can't remember when I wrote this, or where. It seemed appropriate for a renku titled All Ears, and with Michael's link about being lost, about making mistakes. KA

"a tree gets a shave"

First moon stanza. Thinking of an old friend, a kind of woodsman in his own right, who had an old leather strop, well-oiled and gorgeous, as I watched the moonlight fall full-faced on the hemlocks. Saw him shaving the moon off the trees, his razor strop snapping in the cold night airs. MO

"morning's frost warmed to froth"

The problem with shaving is that it always grows back. Maureen's crystalline baby faced moonlit night by morning has its stubble in froth ready for another scrape. PN

"front door opens"

When I went outside to see what was in the mail, I found the link from Pat. When I opened the front door to go back in the house, nothing like this happened, but I imagined that it did, so I wrote it that way. KA

"old men's still raging hatred --"

An old friend and fishing partner of mine - 75 - railing against his father's treatment of the family. His father now long dead. Doors slamming open instead of shut. MS

"mild late winter"

Perhaps the mildness of the day and the birds, harbingers of spring, can lighten the spirit. Then the people in suits carrying briefcases show up. PN

"shirt sleeves rolled back to elbows"

Reading Miyazawa Kenji while walking along the beach seeing a stranger fishing, his untanned arms flying out of his rolled sleeves stark and slippery like the fish he was hunting. Miyazawa's big white feet motif. MO

"blue ocean calm blue"

Marcy's mantra (Al Bundy's neighbor). MS

"out my window fountain and rain sounds"

Being given an almost impossibly huge *samsara* link by Michael, I dove in. My stanza was originally experienced on a rainy day in a *pensione* in Venice overlooking a little courtyard with fountain. KA

"all bets are off now"

That highly charged, mysterious first encounter when you feel wildly attracted to someone and can't help feeling you've known them before. The possibilities seem endless and pointless; it's impossible to even consider the odds. MO

"a crowd of dead leaves and"

Second moon stanza. I can't remember where I was when this poem occurred. All I can remember are the leaves and shadows and the grain of the porch boards. I might have been up in the country, perhaps Inverness, at a friend's house. In this link, the moon is alluded to. KA

"for years the neighbor's house"

Even though it is Keith's moon stanza, there is a heavy sadness about the scene, of something abandoned or forgotten. But then a child's melodious meaningless babble erases the gloom as if it were the light of life. PN

"forget-me-nots everywhere"

My backyard a sea of blue. The sudden death of my youngest sister. Desolate. MS

"are you still yelling"

First flower stanza. One of our luxuries (my son, Kyran, and I) is to get our hair cut at this rather expensive salon in New Haven, Galaxy. It's run by a couple of really cool people and the people who work there are great. Also, the scene alone is worth the price. I was having coffee there one afternoon waiting for Andy to finish cutting Kyran's hair, listening to the crazy wild dialogue and overheard the first two lines. Then added the flower image to match Blanche and also Michael's forget-me-nots that he generously provided my first flower stanza. MO

"what a mess -- who expects the cat"

The cat had just rubbed up against the freshly painted baby furniture -- those brazen remorseless yellow eyes! PN

"Cairo video"

What a mess. The Cairo earthquake. The news video. What at first I thought was a background noise of machinery was the huge roar of voices all across the city. Probably audible to ships in the Med. Number closer to ten million, I suppose. MS

"a blackened nail turning"

Earlier that day before I received the link in the mail, I had been tilling the backyard, turning over the fireplace ashes where the corn was going to be planted in a few months. I suppose this could be an example of what the renku masters in Japan called a distant link. Its connection to the previous stanza being entirely metaphorical. KA

"bare feet on cold tiles"

Don't you remember what your mother said about stepping on rusty nails? And there I was in my bare feet! PN

"arms at each side of your head"

A friend I love deeply who when I wake him in the morning has his arms over his head. He has beautiful cream arms. MO

"a huge firefly"

This is a free translation from Issa. The Japanese for the second line reads, "yurari-yurari to." In his gloss on this line, D.T. Suzuki says there is no equivalent in English for this onomatopoeia. And then goes on to say much, much more. Originally, I assumed he was right, then one day in an idle mood, I remembered the poem and thought, naw, and spontaneously rewrote it from memory. The business card I wrote it on migrated as a bookmark through a few books. When I found it a few months later (by turning it over), I couldn't remember where the original translation was. I thought Buson and searched through all my Buson translations, but no dice, so I checked Issa translations, too, no. I then assumed that I imagined the whole thing and it was an original poem. A year or so after that, I was researching the tea ceremony and rediscovered its source in Zen and Japanese culture. KA

I'm fascinated by Keith's Issa information. It's quite exciting to think of my simple lines being traceable through Issa to Keith's business card bookmark and on. MO

"warning -- keep all body parts"

Firefly flashing. . . a warning. Lifted verbatim from a sticker on the windows of a DTA city busses. A found 2-liner. MS

Michael's found poem in response is perfect.
KA

"frequently the crowds"

Reading the NY Times one morning, some vast migration of people plugging the roadways. Newscasters' cars quite stuck in the tide of humanity. Not moving but just honking. MO

"each night a new figure's"

Maureen's stanza was almost psychically depicted on the news one night. The crowded streets of some European town during the Christmas holidays and some tiny car caught in a sea of people. It's more than just a consumer spree to them. The Feast of the Nativity has a much deeper, ancient, powerful meaning. It supercedes the prerogatives even of the modern world. PN

Pat's stanza is a particularly fine example of a passing link, the hardest thing to write in renku. A passing link doesn't call attention to itself, displays many possibilities for further links, acts as a conduit for new themes, and yet maintains its own character. Basho excelled in them. KA

"nah, you shouldna mailed them bills --"

A domestic argument, where I had screwed up. I sublimated my burden of guilt into a poem. But, we still didn't have any more money.
KA

"too wet to view the moon"

Third moon stanza. It was raining. She felt bad that she had paid the bills and now there was no money. And she didn't like being yelled at. PN

"sound of a car door slamming"

It's the old lying in bed hoping the one you love will pull into the driveway, hearing a

car door slam, and then gradually realizing it's the driveway next door. Hearing laughing voices. Can't help feeling disappointed. MO

"distracted he asks"

The 43 bus in Berkeley on the corner of Bankcroft and Shattuck. I didn't get the driver's name. KA

"volleys taps flag folded"

I was a pallbearer for my friend in #8. A survivor of Pearl Harbor. Don't know what he would have thought of the Military Honors. He didn't care for pretension or formalized ritual of any kind. After the funeral, we returned to his house. No one felt comfortable sitting in his chair at the head of the kitchen table. MS

"the puppy howled"

Thinking about Michael's somber ceremony for a plain man and hearing the neighbor's puppy howling in the deepening twilight. Thinking about dogs wailing over the bodies of the dead or just how their howling for a lost master or friend is a symbol of our mortality. MO

"easy quiet way of chi"

I had a hell of time linking to Maureen's lines and casting about I reread her letter where I found the elements that make my lines. She linked with herself and didn't even know it! She had loud in her lines so I had to have quiet in mine. PN

"on this fresh black asphalt"

Ageku. On a sunny day in Berkeley while riding my bike very slowly and carefully to work, the new asphalt seemed remarkably friendly and active, showing me moving pictures. KA



ALL EARS
SEQUENCE

- 1 - PN Hokku
2 - MO
3 - MS
4 - KA
5 - MO Moon
6 - PN
~~~~~  
7 - KA  
8 - MS  
9 - PN  
10 - MO  
11 - MS  
12 - KA  
13 - MO  
14 - KA Moon  
15 - PN  
16 - MS  
17 - MO Flower  
18 - PN  
~~~~~  
19 - MS
20 - KA
21 - PN
22 - MO
23 - KA
24 - MS
25 - MO
26 - PN
27 - MS
28 - KA
29 - PN Moon
30 - MO
~~~~~  
31 - KA  
32 - MS  
33 - MO  
34 - PN  
35 - MS Flower  
36 - KA Ageku

ALL EARS

is presented in an edition  
of undetermined number  
to the poets  
and their friends



EMPTY HEAD PRESS