

Reviewed

Christopher Patchel. *Turn Turn*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2013, unpag., perfect softbound, 5 x 7. ISBN: 978-1-936848-14-0. US\$12 from www.redmoonpress.com.

by Michael McClintock, Clovis, California

For those who prefer reviews that get to the point, the remainder of this paragraph about this book is for you: few words, right sense, fine images. What more could be wanted from a haiku collection? The rest is gravy.

Christopher Patchel has for ten years belonged to that band of haiku poets from whom I hoped to see a first collection and still be alive to read it. In fact, I think my prospects are good for seeing a second and even third collection, for here is a strong, steady poet who appears to write at least one minor masterpiece a month.

In a personable, short preface Patchel writes: “A quick study I’m not. In putting together this overdue collection it took several years of musing on my decade of published haiku to fully recognize the theme of time that runs through my writing. Time in all its manifest forms and hues: The *chronos* progression and duration we mark off with clock and calendar . . . occurrences that arrest our attention, awaken a sense of *carpe diem*, or even intersect eternity ‘At the still point of the turning world.’ (T.S. Eliot).”¹

I am generally leery of poets who throw quotes of T.S. Eliot at me in their prefaces, but Patchel’s placement of his work at Eliot’s “still point” proves to be a valid recognition of both his intention as a poet and the results he has selected for *Turn Turn*.

For those wanting more (I did), I found a good interview of Christopher Patchel on Melissa Allen’s *Red Dragonfly* blog at

Wordpress.com. In the interview, Patchel says about his haiku apprenticeship:

Writing was about the last thing I expected to get involved in. Nevertheless, I enrolled in a poetry class, and tried my hand at composing free verse. Shortly after that (as the millennium turned) I happened upon haiku for the first time. What struck me was the evocative power of so few words. That more-with-less aesthetic matched my graphic design approach, and I also appreciated the quiet perceptions, unassuming language, grounding in nature, and temporal/eternal resonance. It added up to a rare eureka experience. I read everything I could about the genre and took up the challenges of learning to write it.

One of those challenges was, and still is, working bottom up instead of top down, starting with concrete images (show don't tell) and gut instincts, so that abstract thinking (my default mode) doesn't dominate.

As an artist I'm open to all forms of accomplished haiku. But what most interests me are slice-of-life moments of perception (whether trivial, profound, or impossible to categorize) which become memoir-like over time as one's body of work takes shape as a whole.²

Like Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Patchel's *Turn Turn* comes in four movements, preceded by an interior title page bearing this epigraph:

*To everything there is a season,
and a time for every purpose under heaven.
~ Ecclesiastes 3:1*

Thus Patchel takes pains to lay out his theme. The still point, of course, is the symbol of the Logos, and also the symbol of the Judeo-Christian God. Conceptually, the source of movement and the temporal—the subject matter of Patchel's poems—are in, and emanate from, either/both. Patchel doesn't differentiate, and we needn't either.

Here are the titles of the four movements and their accompanying epigraphs:

As Long as I Like
Forever is composed of nows.
~ Emily Dickinson

Kindle and Dim
Lord, keep my memory green.
~ Charles Dickens

You Are Here
*December is the toughest month of the year. Others are July,
January, September, April, November, May, March, June, October,
August and February.*
~ Mark Twain

Perennial
While I breathe I hope.
~ Latin Proverb

Within this simple, impressive framework, through over 120 poems, Patchel draws his theme from the everyday properties of contemporary life and actual experience. The epigraph for each movement reflects key elements in it—tone, direction, and state of mind. The possibilities for contrapuntal arrangement of subject matter are embedded in this structure. If we look for interrelation and progression, we will find it. In credible, plain diction, Patchel makes poetry of the near-most as well as the absent and infinitely far. This is where I wanted to hold on to the arms of my chair.

Layers opened and into them I fell, each poem in the collection a kind of prompt for bringing into play my own experience. The poems are specific and varied, clearly written from Patchel's memories, yet there is no idiosyncrasy, no self-absorption to shut a reader out. The poems are universal in image, music, and sense, and they must necessarily, I think, be the product of a restraint equal to their delicacy, and a discipline equal to their occasional glee, as in this one, one of my favorites—

fireflies
and I get to stay out
as long as I like

Even a poem like this one, below, speaks of an experience that we can identify and place within any city whatsoever (the city we were in) if we have been that “only living boy”—

day moon
the only living boy
in Chicago

Patchel is a poet who sees within and without at the same time.

Other haiku that act as fulcrums within the collection include these:

summer twilight
the walking path dips
into coolness

thrush song
the play of light
on my eyelids

hometown
the hug
of the hills

Time is looked at, prodded, stopped, slowed, put into motion; it is seen, felt, picked up, set down, worried about, and dreaded. Time is recaptured through consciousness, it is recalled in moments of poignancy as an artifact of childhood, and it is dwelt in and extended into movement felt as coolness in the twilight. This is pure haiku, with nature and human nature in balance, in tension, not as opposites but as complements to one another. The philosophy that imbues these poems and gives them their quiet power may be problematic only to those pre-disposed to see nature and human nature in continual, unabated conflict since Neolithic times.

In each of the above, Patchel demonstrates that he has gone far beyond an apprentice-understanding of the genre and the kind of language (my turn to quote Eliot) the author of *Four Quartets* made reference to when he wrote, “For last year’s words belong to last year’s language / And next year’s words await another voice.”²³

Like most contemporary haiku poets (and their editors), Patchel includes in his work the occasional senryu while at the same time showing no inclination or artistic need to separate, label, or treat them differently within his mix. They are what they are, poems focused entirely on human nature and behavior, and some are splendid. Here are three:

the niece
I cradle in my arms
wants down

supermarket
the cart with a child
at the prow

night train
we are all in this
alone

In that last one, I wonder, does he really think so? More importantly, do I? Do you? Perhaps the question is more important than the answer.

The presence of good senryu in the collection contributes much to the completeness and reality of the world conveyed by the whole, resulting in both aesthetic and thematic satisfactions that haiku alone would leave unspoken and lost.

It is no easy achievement to contribute meaningful, original work to a genre that has a hundred-year history even in its adoptive, English-language setting. This poet has done it. *Turn Turn* gives us plenty of glimpses, and not a few long gazes, at a new day in haiku. If this book is the milestone I think it is, and a weather vane for future things, the new day will be one in which we see poets putting to use and advancing the unique strengths and perspectives that a century of practice has yielded. They will apply them to the timeless themes poetry has always addressed, of course, but also to the special qualities of life in a contemporary world that is different from any other in history, and that is developing its own requirements of language for treatment of subject matter and human experience in poetry.

Through books like Patchel's, lovers of haiku in English have good reason to hang on, keep the fires burning, and take hope. We are still a long way from having to choose between two blind goats—a traditional haiku that has exhausted itself on clichés and stock responses, or a *gendai* approach that shows such unrestrained use of the disjunctive that the result is narcissism, nonsense, and dislocated common sense.

With Patchel you get a third or middle way, one that is concurrently social, intimate, and physical. His poetry is consistently thoughtful, bringing together delicate, unexpected harmonies between what the eye sees and the heart feels, all of it delivered in a seductive language of wakefulness and subdued intensity. This is vision we can take with us into the present and future.

Notes

1. T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton, (II)," *Four Quartets*, New York, Harcourt, 1943.
2. Melissa Allen, "The Lives of Poets, No. 3: Christopher Patchel." *Red Dragonfly*. Retrieved April 12, 2013 from <http://haikuproject.wordpress.com/2011/11/01/the-lives-of-poets-no-3-christopher-patchel/>.
3. Eliot, "Little Gidding, (II)," *Four Quartets*.



Michael McClintock's lifework in haiku, tanka, and related literature, as both poet and critic, spans over four decades. His latest haiku collection, Sketches from the San Joaquin, is from Turtle Light Press (2008). He resides in central California's San Joaquin Valley with his wife, Karen.