

Something Other Than Other by Philip Rowland (2016, Isobar Press, Tokyo and London) 94 pages, 5½×8½", perfectbound. ISBN 978-4-907359-14-0. \$15 from amazon.com

Reviewed by Melissa Allen

Much of Philip Rowland's life in poetry, as poet and editor, has been spent exploring and promoting the boundary between and the cross-fertilization of haiku and other short poetry. As founder and editor of the journal *Noon: Journal of the Short Poem*, he has published haiku and short poetry side by side, making it clear how much they have in common and the extent to which they can resonate with and converse with each other. In a 2008 essay in *Modern Haiku* 39.3, "From Haiku to the Short Poem: Bridging the Divide," he explicitly addresses the relationship between haiku and other poetry, urging haiku poets to acknowledge how much haiku has in common with other types of poetry and to consider reading and writing beyond the boundaries of genre. And, of course, Rowland has long written both haiku and other short-form poetry, exploring what he felt he needed to say in whichever genre seemed most appropriate.

Rowland's new collection, *Something Other Than Other*, both demonstrates his range as a poet and puts into practice his ideas about how haiku and other poetry can interact effectively. Unlike his previous full-length collection, *Before Music*, which contained only haiku, perhaps half to three-quarters of the poetry in *Something Other Than Other* could be described as haiku, or haiku-like, or made up of haiku-like units. Many of these haiku have been published in *Before Music* or elsewhere; many of them are well-known poems that have already taken their place in the canon of contemporary English-language haiku:

winter closing in . . .
I visit the simplest words
in the dictionary

But in *Something Other Than Other*, haiku are not isolated in their own section of the book—though many occur in sequences—but printed in juxtaposition with many other types of poetry, from haibun and tanka to fairly conventional free verse to experimental and concrete poetry. This juxtaposition allows the reader to see haiku not as a carefully fenced-off genre, constantly reminding you of the rules and history associated with them, but as part of the larger stream of poetry in general, sharing, in a larger sense, its history and goals. As Rowland explained in “From Haiku to the Short Poem”:

What does it really mean to “integrate” haiku with other poetry? How might this be done with a view... to stimulating the “ever new human undertaking of thinking together about the things that matter to us”? It has very much to do, I think, with having a wide range of poems “echo and reecho against each other,” creating new kinds of resonance and perhaps even new communities of poets; making us more aware of the limits of language and the syntax of poetry itself, so to speak.

One of the main themes of *Something Other Than Other* seems to be precisely “the limits of language”—the impossibility of completely capturing the evanescent, complex human experience in mere words. Yet another theme is the necessity—perhaps moral, perhaps psychological—of testing those limits. In the book’s four sections, the narrator seems to move gradually through several stages of coming to terms with both the limits and the challenge of pushing beyond them.

The first section is full of language that evokes dormancy, waiting, preparation; the season, largely, is winter. The effect is of hesitant frustration at the inadequacy of language, doubt that it can really ever come to fruition. Pregnancy, sleep and dreaming, the practicing of music are all common signifiers here for this fumbling at words:

sealed hotel room window in my dream I suckle a child

In the second section, which is a sequence unto itself, titled “Surveillance,” the language sharpens, becomes more concrete, takes on the task of describing the fine details of the waking world, but often with an emphasis on their surrealism:

inside an envelope
 inside an envelope
 funeral money

In the third and fourth sections, the narrator largely abandons this more or less conventional attempt at using poetry to describe the world and launches into a variety of experiments in language—found poetry, concrete poetry, and a one-word poem printed by itself on two otherwise blank pages: “verbatomb.” He seems to be working his way through a thicket of language, trying to get at some fundamental reality beyond it. Even the poetry that takes on a more conventional form becomes increasingly abstract and often directly addresses the question of what poetry is for and how it can best be written:

the ruination of the step
 in the performance of the step itself

as, with each poem, we
 bruise an exit from ourselves?

By the end, though, the narrator seems to have come full circle, back to musical metaphors and images that evoke incompleteness or fruitlessness:

dusk rearranging silences

Something Other Than Other uses the whole arsenal of poetic technique to argue, essentially, for the inadequacy of poetry. Paradoxically, the fact that the reader so strongly feels Rowland’s frustration is testament to the fact that though poetry’s ability to conjure reality may not be complete, it is powerful.