

## Book Reviews

REVIEWED BY ROBERT EPSTEIN

**Three Simple Lines: A Writer's Pilgrimage into the Heart and Homeland of Haiku** memoir by Natalie Goldberg (New World Library, Novato, CA: 2021). 161 pages, 5.25" x 8.5". Hardcover, perfect bound. ISBN 978-1-60868-697-1. Available from online booksellers.

Natalie Goldberg is a beloved American writing teacher and memoirist whose Zen-infused *Writing Down the Bones* has won her worldwide acclaim. Her latest book, *Three Simple Lines: A Writer's Pilgrimage into the Heart and Homeland of Haiku*, is written in Goldberg's inimitable raw, impassioned style and recounts several trips to Japan (with an interlude involving cancer) that constitute a unified pilgrimage and reflect Goldberg's deep love of the Japanese haiku masters: Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Shiki, as well as Chiyo-ni, an outstanding eighteenth-century female poet. With travel guides and companions, Goldberg makes her way from the birthplace of a poet to a Zen monastery; from a gravesite to the tea garden, and more. By virtue of her astute powers of observation and penchant for immediacy, the reader is imperceptibly drawn into Goldberg's compelling memoir, feeling like a fellow traveler through Kyoto and Tokyo, as well as a variety of small mountain villages.

The subtle purpose of *Three Simple Lines* has everything to do with the *haiku mind*, which can easily be missed by the unknowing reader, hungry to learn about the mechanics of haiku from this celebrated writing teacher. By virtue of her innocence, candor, sensitivity, genuineness, openness, and zigzag effort (to name a few qualities I discern), Goldberg deftly communicates the Zen art of listening, observing, and intuiting, which, for her, is vital for writing haiku. In this way, she echoes Bashō.

Goldberg's reverence for these masters, especially Buson, is moving. She appreciates his willingness to be more open and self-revealing than she finds Bashō to be. Here she is at Buson's gravesite:

I prostrate three times before the grave. The scattered leaves and needles strewn on the ground smell rich and musky as I lower my head to the dirt...I stand up, suddenly shy. 'What can I say?' I tell Buson. 'Your haiku have touched me, centuries later, in another country. Thank you.' I fold my hands over my chest, do a standing bow.

Listen to Goldberg's poignant take on Shiki who brought haiku into the modern world despite the ravages of tuberculosis, which ultimately took his life:

...even in his suffering, he is able to ponder the cockscombs—how many, fourteen or fifteen? He accepts ambiguity, a high mark for haiku. He accepts the mind of uncertainty and expresses it, making this haiku modern: conventional, banal, unassuming, mortal, almost like a whisper.

Catching herself trying to power through her own murky feelings to some kind of poetic clarity, Goldberg transparently stumbles on an important insight: "Any emotion one feels, pure and simple, moves, passes, if accepted. Earlier I was trying to dominate my confusion, make it clear. Haiku reminds me that it clears on its own, with patience, over time." For anyone who understands haiku, this is not only helpful advice, it is a precious teaching.

The reader learns it was Allen Ginsberg who introduced a young Natalie to haiku poetry in a class she took with the author of *Howl* in 1976. She vividly recalls what he said about haiku: "...upon hearing one, your mind experiences a small sensation of space—he paused; I leaned in breathless—'which is nothing less than God.'" This is language that the Beat poets, including Jack Kerouac,

used—vast, primal, pulsating, crisp. It is not typically the language of contemporary English-language haiku, but she learned it well and puts it to exceptional use in *Three Simple Lines*.

To her credit, Goldberg realizes during one of her trips to Japan—decades after the Ginsberg class—that she has been constrained by her mentor’s description of haiku which she enthusiastically absorbed. I was startled by her self-disclosure, which one would never hear from a teacher preoccupied with guarding her well-established reputation:

For years I believed in Ginsberg’s idea that ‘this little sensation of space, nothing less than God’ is the only true haiku test. But what if God exists quietly, without sensation or without space? What if God takes many different forms?

Goldberg continues: “Sitting again on the ratty, half-collapsed outdoor chair at the pond, I think, *I’ve held myself hostage with Ginsberg’s ideas since 1976.*”

This candor extends to Goldberg’s own haiku writing. Lest anyone assume she has rid herself of all insecurity, Goldberg publicly admits:

Please don’t imagine that my decades of writing practice and Zen meditation have silenced or fully pacified the angry self-critics in my head. That’s not how things work. I’m just much better at managing those voices.

Back home, she joins a monthly haiku group, co-led by the well-respected poet, scholar, and former editor, Charles Trumbull. Goldberg readily acknowledges that she has a lot to learn about the Japanese form despite her widely-recognized accomplishments as writer, painter, and teacher. She submits to multiple haiku readings and critiques and confesses with humor and a hint of self-

deprecation: “When I read my brown sock haiku [*On my brown socks / a single black butterfly / flaps its wings*], it falls like a dead horse on dead ears.” Incredulous, I also read: “Eventually, what I begin to enjoy most is simply not knowing how to do it. I haul in my haiku each month, and they usually land like lead. *I like not being good*, not having a clue” [my emphasis added].

This is not an ordinary reaction or rationalization; it is an extraordinary response by someone who is wide open to everything, including pain, frustration, embarrassment, disappointment, and *even cancer*. This is the Zen Way merging with the Haiku Way. The fruit of this integration is a poem, the revelation of truth that Goldberg shares with the group which thrills her:

Fast mountain creek  
In dark, cold stones  
my original face

Upon hearing some affirmative comments, Goldberg writes: “I burst inside, like a firecracker. It’s been three decades since I felt like this after finishing a poem. I want to do somersaults, flips, across the room.”

Goldberg’s book is very much focused on the inextricable connection that she sees between haiku and Zen. English-language haiku critics will not be happy about this; for the past two decades or more, they have been vociferously arguing that haiku has little or nothing to do with Zen, in particular, or Buddhism, in general.

Haiku poets seeking formal guidance and direction in the art of haiku writing may not find exactly what they are looking for in *Three Simple Lines*. Although there are plenty of haiku penned by the masters and a handful of poems by fellow participants in Goldberg’s haiku group, *Three Simple Lines* is not a how-to manual

(with the exception of “A Haiku Lesson” written by Beth Howard, one of her students, in the book’s last chapter). Nor will one find a scholarly critique of contemporary English-language haiku; there is, for example, no mention at all of innovative developments such as *gendai* (modern), concrete, or minimalist haiku.

It is also true that virtually no one in English-language haiku talks about lineage, but Goldberg does. She says forthrightly: “Haiku is a true lineage.” Not so long ago, the late Canadian poet, Eric Amann, would have understood what she meant, as would the late Robert Spiess, longtime editor of *Modern Haiku*. So would the award-winning poet, artist, and Zen practitioner, Ron C. Moss. Goldberg’s love of the Japanese masters puts her squarely within such a lineage.

What is the foundation of lineage? Love. It is love and devotion that impel one to undertake a pilgrimage, and it is love that prompts a devotee of haiku to pay homage to those who pioneered the Japanese poetic form. This is precisely why Natalie Goldberg reveals her true heart in all its innocence and spontaneity in *Three Simple Lines*. In a discussion over Bashō’s last poem, *Sick on a journey / my dreams wander / over withered fields*, with her late teacher’s dear friend, Harada Roshi, his son, and her travel companion, Mitsue, the latter offers a deeper understanding of “withered fields.” Goldberg has a sudden realization: “I take a step back. Tears spring to my eyes. On his deathbed, Bashō embraced the whole impermanent field of the universe.”

In her love of lineage and all it implies, Goldberg “shines one corner of the world” to quote Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi. Her message, her teaching? Just this: If you care deeply and live fully in the small, fleeting moments, your very life will be a poem. This is the Way of Haiku, dating back to Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Shiki. I am certain all four haiku masters—plus Chiyo-ni and Allen Ginsberg—would bow deeply in recognition of Goldberg’s Great Effort. I bow, too. □■