Interview with Grant Hackett originally made for and published in Multiverses no 1. This journal exists no longer.

Grant Hackett has for some years been writing what he terms "monostich" poems, poems consisting of one line, which resonates with deeply with haiku though they also seem to balance on the edges of this form. Nonetheless there's a distinct influence of haiku - the brevity, the now, the movement from the eternal to the temporary, form the big to the small "things" - in his poetry. Grant Hackett's voice and form is explicitly his own as is his imagery, the scenes and themes that resounds from deep existential notes. Like with Hosai Ozaki death, void, nothingness, re-entering eternity or what lies beyond that, loneliness, pain - themes that often results in self-pitying verses - are present here without ever being sulky. These themes/experiences rather become a natural juxtaposition to the beauty and ever on-goings of the natural world. His poetry has been published in several places and he continues to post regularly on his blog: Monostichpoet (monostichpoet.blogspot.com).

I first asked Grant whether he would do an article/a-row-of-words about his poetry and his distinctive form, but we settled on me (Johannes S. H. Bjerg) plotting down some questions instead. The following is the result of this:

Jshb: How did you come to haiku in the first place? Were you writing poetry before that? And what was it with haiku that triggered you or make it "click" for you? (maybe as opposed to other kinds of poetry)

GH: I began writing poetry, in an offhand sort of way, when I was 15 or 16. The greatest influence at that time was the music of the day (this was in the early 1970s). I'm sure I knew of haiku, but at that time I had no special interest in the form. Then one day when I was 18, in a small book shop in Columbia, Missouri, I stumbled upon *Cape Jasmine and Pomegranates* by Ippekiro. The effect of his poetry upon me was instantaneous and profound. It was like a religious experience. The top of my head came off. I had met my master, the one I would learn from. I knew I would be a poet. And I knew my poetry would be small. I felt in Ippekiro's haiku a pure poetic expression of existence. And I felt that I had to, in some way, make my way to that voice. Thus began my real life

as a poet. My respect and admiration for Ippekiro have not waned.

Jshb: How soon did you settle with the one-line haiku/the monostich form and why?

GH: I was in and out of college a number of times in the 70s and 80s. When in school, studies displaced the need to write. When I left school, it was often with the feeling that my true life was in poetry and the life of the imagination. I read Makoto Ueda's *Modern Japanese Haiku*, and was immensely impressed with his translations of Ozaki Hosai. Some of Hosai's poems Ueda rendered in two lines. And the existential cries at the heart of Hosai's poetry stirred my soul and my passion for poetry. I was writing haiku-like short poems of three lines, and longer pieces of maybe eight or twelve lines. Some of the haiku-like poems were published in *Frogpond* in the late 70s. When my son was born in 1991, writing fell away with the busy-ness of life, home, work, and fatherhood. I didn't pick up writing again until 2003. My marriage had ended, hard times had come. I was alone and being reborn. The poetry I wrote at that time was poetry-as-therapy. Very haikulike, three lines, recounting the pain of existence. But life in imagination caught fire again, and I began writing poems virtually every day, slowly bringing into birth a poetic voice. By early 2008, I had written thousands of small poems, all for myself, seeking no audience, unsure of the voice that was becoming my own. Then sitting at home one day in early February, 2008, I wrote a poem in one line and used a double colon where the line break would normally be. The moment was an epiphany, the effect electric. A doorway opened and I entered a new world. A few of those first one line, double colon poems:

We call it night or we call it dream :: slip in

The door to my throat opens :: the only thread shining

Go into the knife :: a cup of black clouds to drink

Ishb: In your view and work, what does the one-line haiku/monostich offer you that the

"traditional Western" 3-line form doesn't? What are the pro's and cons of these two forms in your work – in as far as 3-liners play any role there?

The one line poem is poetry as utterance.

A cry of the soul, a statement, a shout.

A bell struck once, yet carrying through time.

The stroke of a line in Zen calligraphy.

The enso.

One line in poetry can be like these things, but more than one line cannot.

A series of lines steps through time.

And I am deeply drawn to the notion of moment.

Thus, I see the one line poem and the three line poem as presenting different experiences of poetic time.

Jshb: You invented – or created – your own kind of cutting "word" the double colon (::) that makes your one-line verses read rather different from other one-line haiku. Would you elaborate on that?

GH: Beauty is a soulful human response to the world we live in—the soul's response to the world, the world calling out to the human soul. Beauty is an interaction, a dance of two elements.

Art is the human exploration of beauty through imagination. Art is choreography: human-designed dance. The dancers may be bodies, or words, or colors, or sounds. The elements of art must move. Creative tension. The notion of yin and yang capture this completely.

The problem for the artist is creating the beautiful dance.

For many years I felt I had failed at this.

But double colon in the one line poem seemed to be the tool of design I lacked and needed.

The double colon lets me order the dance.

Traditional punctuation orders our words, of course. But the conventions of use make them more

difficult to use imaginatively. We expect a certain relationship between elements when we encounter a comma. And another kind of relationship when we encounter a period.

The double colon carries no meaning. Thus, it can be used to introduce any number of effects. It allows me to create a slight pause, and slow the pace. It allows me to set seemingly unrelated images gracefully, meaningfully, side by side. It allows me to make an imaginative leap and to, hopefully, carry the reader with me. And all of this in the space of an utterance. One of the tiniest dances possible, I think.

The double colon gives me greater powers as a choreographer of words.

Jshb: In February 2009 you stated in Roadrunner Journal, that "The poems I write inhabit the borderlands of haiku". Could you say a little about that?

GH: I'm not sure that what I said in 2009 holds true today. The notion of haiku in the West has become, through one lens, diffuse almost to the point of a meaningless term; or through another lens, open to the avant-garde and experimentation as the evolutionary root of an evolving Western short poetry form. In either case, I find the monostich to be welcomed in the ever-expanding haiku world. Now, do I think of my work as haiku? No, I don't. My poetic voice has been extraordinarily shaped by Japanese haiku poetry, but I do not see myself as a haiku poet.

What I imbibed from Japanese haiku poetry is this: it all happens in a moment of time.

The mysteries of the soul we experience in flash—the pond calling out to Basho's frog!

The poetic moment opens into eternity. The dance that is small can say it all.

The Zen-based Japanese haiku poets pursued this with their poetic imagination.

But I am neither Zen-trained, nor Japanese.

My job, my learning, has been to nurture—and to allow myself to be nurtured by—the explosive poetry of the small. And the course of this education has included, of course, many non-haiku poets and poetries. I have let this voice grow as it will, speak as it will, without being tied to any pre-existing poetic form or formula. Only after writing thousands and thousands of poems did my poetry evolve into its current form. And for several years after that I was thoroughly unaware that the term "monostich" existed.

Jshb: How do you work? Is it in the spur of the moment (inspiration)? Do you have a "routine"? Going about your everyday life what "triggers" a poem to sprout within you/call it forth?

GH: I write by giving time to writing. I do not follow a strict schedule. But there have been very few days in the last six or seven years in which I did not sit down to write.

I don't carry a notebook, or jot down ideas and observations during the course of the day.

I begin my other work (which is making book indexes) very early in the morning. And I take several walks each day, sometimes for errands, sometimes aimless, but always awake to the world.

Wakefulness is the key. Occupying the center.

What starts a poem is many and varied. Unexpected and unpredictable. A memory, a shadow, a word filled with light that lifts itself into the mind. A lot of poetry is poets responding to poets. I find that reading poetry and writing poetry are intimately related.

The point of my writing is to explore and give expression to the poetic imagination.

This gets quite difficult to explain.

But I don't try to talk about or shape what happens in the poetic imagination---rather I try to let my poems BE what happens in the poetic imagination. The Tao of poetry.

This also doesn't mean that my writing is spontaneity out of control. Words and images are often recycled many times through the imagination before there is that "sense" that was written is right.

Question: In your poetry you seem to deal with what could be called existential matters, or rather the state of being a (conscious) entity in the world on the brink of evaporating or dissolving into The Big Silence/Nothingness; maybe to become "just another passing temporary emptiness". This shifts in the mood from the dispassionate to the slightly melancholic. Death is always present, not necessarily a "sad" death, but a death nonetheless. And is there a "pain of being" in the poems? Is that a fair reading?

(This seems to go through from (at least) "tiny mortal drums" (Roadrunner February 2009) to the recent work on your blog (monostichpoet.blogspot.com))

And then, from time to time, sudden shots of overwhelming beauty.

Could you comment on that?

GH:I think your reading of my poetry is quite fair. Death, transience, loss, melancholy - I know these matters cycle endlessly through my poetry. These matters are the forces that also most move my soul.

I listen as I write to my heart as it moves. A movement of the heart is what leads the way into writing.

So these heartfelt themes of mortality in an infinite world reappear again and again.

A lover of roses does not tire of seeing roses. A lover of the soul is always anxious to hear her next song.

So I am soul - led in poetry.

The poems that are "shots of overwhelming beauty" arise in the same way. From time to time things just come out that way!

A small selection of poems:

When the canyon smells of moon and mind :: can I gaze at the pine :: without dying

My life is that glimpse of the sky you have as it chases a small bird into breath

Washing my poetry :: I sweeten the sea :: until the green of your island is saved

While dancing slowly :: like a friend of midnight :: voice is my instrument of stillness

The land I bought is old and wise :: I farm my nothing on the moonlit side

Far off in the world light fills a window :: my crow falls into the sun

Into the garden I pour my stillness :: will have the whole sun after death

Deep was the snow in your middle years :: then emptiness broke into your home

The world I walk is smaller than the seed that feeds a sparrow his song

A silent drum :: a darkened lamp :: more starlight than I can use

Publications & links:

Counterexample Poetics

Salamander Cove

Roadrunner Haiku Journal, August 2008

Roadrunner Haiku Journal, November 2008

Roadrunner Haiku Journal, February 2009 (tiny mortal drums)

Roadrunner Haiku Journal, May 2009

Roadrunner Haiku Journal, August 2009

Roadrunner Haiku Journal, November 2009

tinywords

Published in print:

Lilliput Review,

Presence

A selection in *Haiku 21* anthology (Modern Haiku Books, 2011, ed. Lee Gurga and Scott Metz)