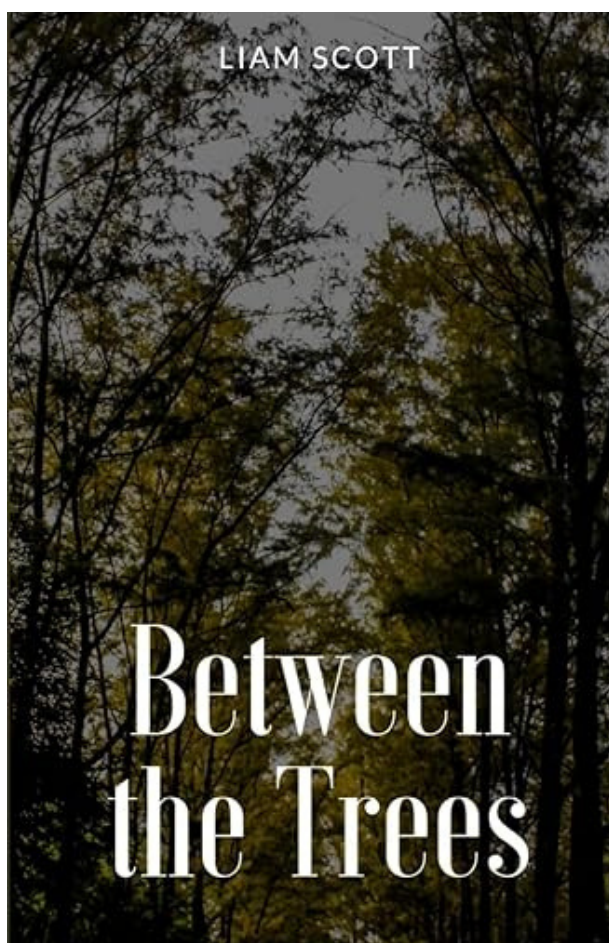


‘BETWEEN THE TREES’

A BOOK REVIEW WITH AUTHOR LIAM SCOTT
BY JORDAN CUNNINGHAM



INTRODUCTION

The Haiku, as defined by Adam L. Keen in his collection of haiku poetry, is a Japanese short poem with three lines and a total of 17 syllables, structured as 5-7-5. Haiku is written in plain language and concrete nature imagery rooted in seasons.

They are designed to be conveyed with restraint, suggestiveness and subtlety. Originally, Haiku was written to suspend the ego, to be less of an 'I' type of poem and therefore less about the self with a greater focus on the world around us. However, more modern haiku poetry challenges this and impacts our perceptions of the world and vice versa (A.L. KEEN, p. xxiii). This split from a detached form of Haiku and a more individualistic tradition is worth noting. Pre-19th century Haiku, Hokku, were wholly a Japanese tradition used as a pre-modern word game, which often was used for all kinds of purposes and was often very far from the elevated form Haiku commonly was felt to have; they were often scatological and sexual. This is interesting because Haiku's more well-known individualistic form is a relatively modern phenomenon that only appeared from the mid-19th century onwards, an individualistic motive (A.L. KEEN, p. xxvi). The Haiku, often seen as a distinctly ancient Japanese form, is, in fact, an invented or artificial poetic form. This complicated and complex form and tradition presents some tension when considering what the Haiku is supposed to represent and focus on with nature and seasons.

This tension is one that modern poets have usefully utilised to reflect upon how the Haiku should be used. Additional tensions have also arisen with Haiku purists who strongly oppose non-Japanese Haiku. They argue that it is akin to a form of cultural colonialism or appropriation (A.L. KEEN, p. xxx). I disagree, however, as modern Haiku is arguably invented, and nature and poetry are not the possession of anyone. The evolution of Haiku from a traditional to a more modern form is a fascinating journey that continues to engage and intrigue us.



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BETWEEN THE TREES

Considering this background, I am reviewing Liam Scott's exceptional collection, *Between the Trees*, which mainly includes Haiku poetry with one or two notable exceptions. The collection begins with the longest piece, 'Absence'. The poem extols a sadly beautiful and intriguing meditation that can be viewed in various ways. Firstly, I love the theme and the imagery used to convey this. The progression through the poem of growing up and of time passing the various events occurring throughout life was evocative. What I feel holds the poem back in comparison to everything else in the collection is the execution. Using a longer form reduced the impact slightly and made it noticeably stand apart from the rest in the collection, and it does not play to the poet's strengths. It is hard to put your finger on, but too much is said for what is described as an absence. Then again, an absence can leave a huge hole. A duality is inherent here, making for an interesting theme that I feel is waiting to be explored in the poem. There is an uncertainty or ambivalence between the content and form, which reflects on the poem, which meanders a little and reduces the impact. The poem would be much more impactful with more restraint and a structure to contain it to complement the message and amplify the message by what is said or significantly what is not said.

All of my misgivings about the previous poem were delightfully addressed in the following poem of the collection, which is my personal favourite of the collection, 'Blood Red Sky':

Skies blood red, streaming
Like open veins, sun sinking
Beyond the eye's edge.

'Blood Red Sky' is immediately gripping and impactful. I love the striking visual imagery the Haiku form allows the poet to showcase. The poem and the content combine to achieve the desired effect of the poet's message. What I enjoy in poetry is ambiguity, and this poem, more than most, left me questioning. The poet's ability to evoke such ambiguity is genuinely intriguing and keeps the reader engaged.

On display is a meditation on nature and the personification of nature and its link to the body and bodily senses, which is a beautiful touch. In a sense, combining the body and soul as a sacred ritual is suggested. This is suggested particularly by the image of the streaming blood, which is very evocative and Christ-like. The visual nature of the poem empowers the reader to interpret and draw associations that the poet may not necessarily intend. The Christ-like symbolism is suggested by the bleeding veins, which evoke the image of blood and death associated with the crucifixion. The cross and the positioning of Christ, resembling a tree with its arms and body integrated like branches, further reinforce this symbolism. As nails, a manufactured object, are the instruments that bind body and wood together, we get a duality, which the poem suggests. Blood can be seen as a nourishing symbol; the sky feeds the Earth and the people who reside on it. On the other hand, the sky and nature are haemorrhaging because of humanity, and open veins suggest penetrative and harmful connotations. Perhaps it is a self-harming relationship where nature and the relationship between humanity and nature can be viewed as abusive. Humanity has been bestowed with a beautiful body and a world built to sustain it, yet humanity often fails to see this and harms nature and, by extension, themselves. Furthermore, I find it interesting that it is 'skies' and not just 'sky', meaning there are multiple skies rather than one vast expanse, which is the sky. Again, there are a few dualities at work in the poem, which expand its meaning and leave an impression of ambiguity, which I love in poetry.

My mantra is that poetry, by its use of language, is designed to challenge and to make us question, not to give answers, and the poet achieves this aim exceptionally.



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Next is 'Goodness', another delightful piece that uses nature to reflect on human perceptions of nature and its reflection on humanity. The poem suggests that 'goodness' is associated with green, meaning nature itself is goodness, which conveys an obvious environmental message of how nature, how greenness, gives us life. However, I was left with a feeling that I alluded to in my introduction of whether Haiku fit into a modern industrial world. The poem suggests that goodness will grow back like the tall tree that loses its green. However, does it always grow back? What if nature recedes and is prevented from growing back? Does this suggest that goodness is, therefore, dying if this occurs? I feel this tension is an area the poet could explore further, leading to my main suggestion that the collection needs more variation. The following two poems, 'Frozen Buds' and 'Hazy Folds', are excellent poems, but I find myself wanting the poet to take their skill in the form in a different direction. To subvert the Haiku form and, in a sense, to experiment akin to Ezra Pound's experiments with Haiku-like forms in a poem such as 'In a Station of the Metro' and other Imagist poetry. The clash of the urban and an increasingly industrial world when presented in a form often focused on nature and rural environments. Can the Haiku stay regular? Is the traditional Haiku a suitable vehicle for the modern world? This tension between nature and industrialisation is a conflict that the poet could further explore, creating a need for resolution.

Like Haiku, Imagist poetry employed 'the language of common speech, new rhythms, new subject matter and strong, concrete imagery' (XIAO, p. 179); however, it tackled these issues from a very different context, which was much more fragmented and international in scope. As Xiao states, Imagist writers wrote about a time when 'the world entered the twentieth century', a time of 'global disaster for mankind' in the 'First World War' (XIAO, p. 179). This form of poetry needed to be modified from its original roots to something different to reflect the issues the poetry was addressing. My prior mention of the innate tension inherent in the Haiku form is evident here in a sense for these poets that 'life was fragmented, dislocated and chaotic' (XIAO, p. 180). This fragmentation also reflected the modes of media coming into being at the time: 'The twentieth century saw a rapid development in all fields of technology at a speed that the world had never seen before' (XIAO, p. 180).

Here, the form of Haiku and short poetic forms is used to reflect on contemporary society and the speed at which it changes, which challenges the permanence of nature. Xiao draws attention to Imagists' links with the 'Japanese Haiku[...]that each word must be an image that can be pictured in the mind' (XIAO, p. 182). They share the visual possibilities of poetry but differ in contextual purpose, yet in their different ways, they share the same goal of highlighting the beauty of nature. In his poem, Pound contrasts, yet also connects, the faces in an urban crowd characterised as apparitions with a black bough. Pound here presents the ghostly nature of urban crowds with the 'aliveness' of nature. As a result, 'Imagists brought fresh air into the poetic world and opened a new field for modern poets' (XIAO, p. 188). Is this still needed when using traditional forms from different times?



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Finally, the collection ends with a variation of the Tanka form in 'Sunrise':

A fiery gold globe
Slowly rises from the sea,
Peering over clouds,
Torching the dark with the new,
Skies ablaze with beginnings.

As previously observed, I started to feel a recurrent echo in the poems as their similarities started to muddle them together. However, I was pleasantly surprised again by the poet as the follow-up poem improved drastically, and I observed independent thoughts from the previous poems. 'Sunrise' contains beautiful imagery, which is complemented by the welcome change of poetic structure in a Tanka. It allows the figure of the sun to be viewed from a unique perspective. It almost represents the sun as the great redeemer and God-like, offering a new perspective on something we take for granted and often fail to notice, which is so amazing and important to life.

The tension I sought is provided in this poem as it suggests that life, as we often live it, leads us to ignore or fail to notice this. It distracts us from the miracle that is life and existence. The 'dark' that occupies our lives leads us to miss those things that make life important. There is a beautiful cyclical call-back to 'Blood Red Sky Haiku' here, a poetic device that brings a sense of completion and satisfaction to the collection. I see them as beautiful companion pieces on their own merits, but reading both in conjunction elevates each poem—the dark represents what causes the sky to bleed.

The poet excels in these short forms, and the closing poem is a perfect note on which to close the collection. I would be interested to read poems from the poet that vary in style to fully observe their poetic range and implement more variety and tension.



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C O N C L U S I O N

Scott's collection displays a poet with exceptional talent in Haiku and short poetic forms. The poems capture the immediate beauty in nature and the interconnectedness of nature with our humanity. As a whole, the collection succeeds and leaves me excited to see more of the poet's work. While I maintain my reservations about the repetitive nature of some parts, I see great potential for growth in Scott's work. I would love to see the poet take their talent in new directions, challenging and subverting the form of the Haiku and Tanka. To step out from the familiar and venture into uncharted territories. I felt the poem 'Absence' could evolve into something more substantial and be pushed to its best literary form, as described by some of my critiques. Ultimately, my critique pales compared to the depth and beauty captured in *Between the Trees*.

Sources:

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INTERVIEW

WITH AUTHOR LIAM SCOTT

What factors initially drew you to Japanese poetic forms such as Haiku and Tanka, and what continues to inspire your interest in these genres?

Brevity and accessibility. The form is easy to play with and what most inspires me. It allows me to create while working within the parameters of a form that lends itself well to recording momentary impressions of the world around me.

What elements of the Haiku and Tanka forms do you consider most impactful?

Less is more, short poetic forms present us with striking and visual details, and they get straight to the point.

What is your perspective on the relevance of Haiku in a contemporary context?

Haiku provides snapshots of the present moment, the now, which we often overlook. Today's world is overstimulated, and poetry is a way to remind us of the need to seek these snapshots so we appreciate our existence. Haiku is a form of mindfulness in our fast-paced, digital world, a tool to slow down and appreciate the beauty in the ordinary. This perspective not only enriches the understanding of my work but also offers a fresh take on the role of poetry in the modern world.

What motivated you to create and publish this collection?

For me, poetry has always been an outlet, a constructive way to note down my thoughts, whatever they may be, creatively and constructively. This is a highly insightful and positive perspective on what makes poetry and creative expression important. It allows every experience of our lives to be framed in a way that offers some form of catharsis. The catalyst for collating my poems into a collection was a competition I entered, which benefited me as a poet. It gave me confidence and a sense of pride that I had created the book and that it was a product of myself and my life leading up to that point. This is an aspiring message for anyone interested in writing poetry who feels reticent due to a lack of confidence or the worry that they will not be good. Poetry is not necessarily about good or bad; it is about what it gives you if it comes from a genuine place.

How did you determine the title of your book, and what significance does it hold for you?

I am an arborist, which plays a significant role in what I like about Haiku and what creative expression, in general, can do. I have a distinctly direct relationship with nature, and I observe the reality of nature and what it can denote metaphorically to reflect on the human experience from my perspective. The book's title, *Between the Trees*, reflects this deep connection with nature. I see trees as a metaphor for life, with their roots representing our past, their trunk our present, and their branches our future. This title holds a profound significance, encapsulating my work's essence and personal journey.

INTERVIEW

WITH AUTHOR LIAM SCOTT

Were there any specific themes or messages you aimed to explore in this work?/What do you hope readers will derive from your book?

I wanted to emphasise nature generally but particularly the 'stillness' of nature, which is a reprieve from modern life and the chaotic nature of urban spaces. It provides a place of calm and reflection. The poem 'Absence' was a notable exception to this, and I directly used the poem to reflect and contemplate a personal experience and the feelings this conjures for me. What this highlighted was my wish to convey to readers that writing poetry, whatever its thematic background, is for fun, to enjoy the writing process itself as much as the finished product.

Which authors/poets have had a significant influence on your writing?

·T.S Eliot
·Percy Shelley
·Cormac McCarthy

What was the most rewarding experience you encountered during the writing process?

It is not easy to pinpoint the most rewarding experience, as the whole experience was filled with enjoyment. The closest I felt a moment represented this was my family seeing the physical object of the book and my pride in showing a piece of myself and what I had created to my loved ones and the pride of being able to do this.

What would it be if you could offer one piece of advice to aspiring writers?

Keep writing, and do not worry about what you are writing about. To get it down, capture that moment before it gets away. Beginning something is always the hardest step. Once you overcome that initial moment of conjuring something into existence and have captured it, the rest flows from there, and you then have the space to see what you can do with it. Most importantly, however, I stress the need to write for yourself and not for anyone else. Do not worry about what others think. What matters is what you think. Good poetry is poetry that matters to you.

Are there elements from your personal life that inspired any of the poems included in this collection?

Personal experiences such as grief appear in the poems, most explicitly in 'Absence'. However, these individual experiences are dealt with in poetic form as a method of catharsis to deal with pain and loss healthily and creatively, which helps support mental health.

What projects are you currently pursuing, and can you provide any previews or hints regarding your upcoming work?

I hope to produce more soon. I want to continue my poetry work and try different types of poetry and poetic forms. I also wish to branch out and write other creative pieces like film reviews and short stories. I am particularly excited about experimenting with new poetic forms and exploring different themes in my future work. I am considering a collection that delves deeper into the human experience, exploring love, loss, and resilience.

"Whatever comes next, it is evident the writer is full of ideas, and like *Between the Trees*, they will produce something insightful, and I look forward to when this day comes."

ABOUT

Liam Scott is a 30 year old professional arborist with a penchant for writing now and then. He currently lives in New Zealand but his heart belongs in Scotland. He describes himself as 'still finding my feet in regards to writing.' He has since set up a Substack in which he shares his thoughts/reviews on cinema and film culture as well as a separate publication in which he posts more creative writing - prose and poetry. He is trying to write as much as I can amidst plying his trade in the tree tops.

website: <https://ithacapages.substack.com/>



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