



Fiona Sampson

A love offer from tree to mouth

Alexandar Prokopiev, born in Skopje, writer and poet, is famous for his Haiku books and Haiku poetry. This is an exclusive review by Fiona Sampson on the Haiku poetry by Alexandar Prokopiev and his Haiku book *Sparrows on the wire*.

How do we know when we are in the presence of real poetry? It has something, perhaps, to do with what Virginia Woolf called a "little halo of unconscious life" surrounding the words themselves. Woolf was reflecting on the life of prose. But any piece of writing –especially a poem – which has the ability to sustain itself exhibits that extra dimension, that generosity, which in a person we call presence. It manifests something more than the sum of its parts: something for which there is no better word than living. Aleksandar Prokopiev's haiku are alive in this way. They do not rely on the apparatus of apologia or critical reception: although they can perfectly well bear the weight of those structures. Instead, autonomous, they inhabit their form and its capacities as gracefully – as lightly –as one of his own leaping cats. Living poems move on the tongue: on yours, mine, the drunk's in the deserted Sunday morning street. W. H Auden had a profound effect on contemporary English verse when he said that a poem must be memorable: that this is how it achieves the autonomy and identity which are the marks of real poetry. Memorised, a poem simultaneously becomes familiar and retains its native mystery. It is part of the world we live in and yet transforms it. Just this mixture of familiarity and mystery are the marks of fairytale; and Prokopiev's haiku, with their suggestions of stories half-told, of a proverbial register, come close to fairytale too.

Whether memorised or not, Prokopiev's poems are owned by the world around them because of the way they move in and out of it: the living world breathes. And this movement – this transformative exchange between kinds of being and forms of awareness – is what flies a fish simultaneously through the cages of a fish farm and the wide (reflected) summer sky. It allows us to see the sexual competition between tomcats as all too human. It is the paradoxical bitter-sweet of memories; the moment of misapprehension which turns a pile of rubbish into a river island: the yoke of metaphor. This movement of exchange like breathing is how the world lives. In these haiku, Prokopiev often calls this movement between ways of being loved. He breaks open the haiku form to tell love stories. And he shows us a world which exchanges love-gifts with the poet and his reader, like the figs that a tree offers to the mouth of the man who eats them –and to our mouths, too, as we read aloud the poem where they appear. The living poem is as unpredictable, as variously profound and laughable, as human life in all its other forms. It is full of life: crammed with dumped cookers and saplings under bridges, with traffic lights and crows. It is

also alive with symbolism. Poetry is the unconscious life of a language; and living poetry is both conscious and unconscious at once, very much as we are. Behind the material world that these haiku evoke are lines of resonance down which colours and characters alike appear and reappear. Woolf's "little halo of unconscious life" also names the exchange between these unconscious and conscious appearances: between a final glance and the sunset which floods it, between the child who bursts a balloon by hugging it too tightly and the shot which rings out in a city threatened by a nationalist war. Many of these haiku were written under the pressure of extraordinary times, but Prokopiev is a poet neither of the ordinary nor of the extraordinary. His poems refuse that distinction. Crowded with life, they also break open the poet's role as a voyeur and allow him to step onto the page. These are haiku not only of observations but of experience. The poet lives and at the same moment reflects. He finds the world both familiar and extraordinary: both "miraculous touch" and "comic book". He is handing it to us, asking us to read it, to be transformed by it. The poems are alive with generosity. This is his "love offer".

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