

E-MAIL AND HAIKU: A Remembrance of Mark Lanier
Jeffrey Harrison

[This is a longer version of the tribute I gave at Mark's Celebration of Life]

In the weeks after we lost Mark, I spent a lot of time—like most of you, I imagine—e-mailing with friends and family, sharing stories and feelings in an exchange of grief and mutual support. Friendships suddenly meant more to us in the sudden absence of one of our dearest friends. At the same time, I began obsessively mining multiple computers for old e-mails from Mark, as a way of trying to hold onto him, to be with him again, or to hear his voice if only in this silent, intangible medium. But I also had his voice in another form: the haiku he had sent me, and then the additional ones that Cole e-mailed to me—about seventy total, all apparently written in the last four years. And so I had these two very different modes of communication in which to look for Mark.

One of the things Mark and I liked to do together most was go to museums. Mark worked hard at his job, but it was not all that difficult to get him to take half a day off to go to the Museum of Fine Arts, the Gardner, or the Fogg (which he preferred to call it even after the name change). Sometimes all it took was a quick e-mail. Usually I picked him up in Brookline and continued on to the museum. One morning in June 2017, during the car ride on the way to the Museum of Fine Arts to see a Matisse show, he said he had something serious to tell me that he didn't want me to reveal to anyone else. I braced myself for whatever it might be. Mark had helped me through some difficult periods of my life, and I wanted to be, as they say, "there for him." The Top-Secret information he entrusted to me that day turned out to be his plan to submit some of his haiku to the Haiku Society of America, to be considered for the Harold G. Henderson Memorial Haiku Award. In order to remain anonymous, which Mark felt was of the utmost importance, he said he was going to send in his submission under the pseudonym Laszlo Lanyé. He asked if I knew what had inspired him to use the name Laszlo. I said, "Victor Laszlo, in *Casablanca*!?"—and he burst out laughing that I got it on my first guess. Later that day, after I'd dropped Mark back at his house and returned home myself, I found an e-mail from him that started:

I had a blast playing hooky and looking at interesting art today.

and ended like this:

I was cooling off in the pool and your effusive, childish, "Victor Lazlo!?! " jumped into my head.

Had to hold on to the side of the pool, again, on that one.

About a month later, Mark sent me an e-mail that began:

[Jeff,] your job is actually much harder than I realized.

I had to FedEx my haiku submissions for the Henderson Award on Saturday to meet the Monday deadline.

He went on to relate his desperate last-minute rush to a FedEx location downtown to meet *their* deadline for overnight mail (since he'd already missed the deadline at the Brookline location). His e-mail continues:

RUSH! DRIVE! FIND PARKING!

Where the fuck is FEDEX?

I submitted my package with about 30 seconds to spare before the 4 pm deadline.

Got home and discovered that Laszlo, the idiot novice, had not included the entrance fee of \$7.

So now Mark had to risk blowing his cover by paying Laszlo's fee... online... with a credit card... bearing the name Mark Lanier. "See below," Mark added parenthetically. What I found below was a follow-up e-mail from Mark to the Haiku Society of America explaining his payment. It's classic Mark (as in: I might as well have some fun with this), and it's written in a unique style that many of you would recognize: every sentence, even the little ones, is set apart in its own paragraph. Here it is:

To Whom It May Concern at the Haiku Society of America:

I have just paid \$7 as the non-member entry fee for Laszlo Lanyé, my friend, who has submitted several of his haiku to your Henderson Award Contest.

Laszlo refuses to send haiku by email.

He also refuses to join any organization and become a "member".

He told me that he sent his Henderson Award submission by FedEx, printed, as he likes, on a sheet of paper, to the correct address, and I think he probably did.

So I am paying his entry fee.

Don't ask me.

Artists are sometimes difficult.

Thank you,

M.L.

"my friend" Mark commented in his e-mail to me, "That makes me laugh every time."

Among the many other e-mails from Mark that I found while searching my older computer was a very different one he had written several years earlier, in November 2013, from his beloved Kyoto. In it, he described (in full paragraphs this time) an experience he had at Shugakuin Imperial Villa the day before:

Before we were allowed to enter the villa grounds, I walked down a stone road, and next to the official villa site is a farm that the government of Japan purchased for "open space" to preserve Shugokuen.

On this day, the farmer had taken the huge, pale, bulbous radishes that are so much a prize in Kyoto this time of year, and he was cleaning them in a tub of running water. Twisting and scrubbing. Turning and washing. The skin becoming a shiny white. The beginning of luster.

It's a beautiful paragraph, almost like a prose poem, and I immediately recognized it as a description of the experience that inspired the first haiku Mark sent to me, a few years later. (Unlike Laszlo, Mark did *not* refuse to send haiku by e-mail.) It goes like this:

**Asking him the way
Bent and washing radishes
"Walk on, East or West"**

This feels like an instant classic, as if written by one of the Japanese haiku masters, in the way it captures a simple moment that opens into mystery and contains a touch of humor.

And like the classics, many of Mark's haiku are about the ephemerality of nature's beauty, and of life:

Moon Over Brookline, June

**Ivory lover
Late summer moon in the pond
Don't shimmer, don't leave**

The moon is a perennial subject in Japanese haiku, and it was for Mark too:

June in St. Botolph's

**Embered, burning moon
Lighting the honeysuckle
Just like prayer lanterns**

Though most of Mark's haiku take nature as their subject, a few of them have urban settings:

**June eve Central Park
Soft light is its own music
Yellow piano**

I love how he's paying such close attention to the light that he hears it as music. This next one, also urban, is more haunting:

**Autumn blows cardboard
Empty souls along the street
Get your package ready**

Some of the haiku are lighter:

Recognition

**They love my haiku
Old summer toads in a well
They like fat flies too**

My House

**These be rules for guests:
Wake to home; let your troubles rest;
Don't fart in my house.**

And this one is like a children's storybook in miniature:

**On a moonshine night
Children dream of sand dolphins
Wander the river**

But Mark doesn't hold back when he glimpses something frightening:

Near Helena Wildfire, Trinity Alps, CA

**Widows, refugees
In green winter coats they trudge
Fir trees up the ridge**

In most of Mark's haiku, as in traditional haiku, the speaker of the poem almost disappears, in an act of attention focused outward on the world. But we sense Mark's presence, pondering the world with care and intensity, and in a few we almost see him:

October, Toward Kyoto

**Ivory autumn bone
Crescent lantern going home
Empty footpath, alone...**

Prayer

**Let me be a stone
In clear running water
Here, doing my job**

That one brings to mind the river stones Mark searched for and collected, in another Japanese tradition. As Dave Henry observed in an e-mail, “Mark loved how the world expressed itself beyond the human.” Maybe that’s what he was trying to get at in his haiku. Yes, Mark was large— a cosmos, as Walt Whitman might say— yet through this small but expansive poetic form, he seemed to be yearning for something larger than himself, beyond the human... and maybe beyond the sayable.

Sometimes Mark would send me an e-mail that contained a haiku and nothing else: thus, a haiku can become an e-mail. And sometimes, though perhaps more rarely, an e-mail can become a haiku. Another high school friend, Steve Bookman, in an exchange about Mark and our grief at losing him, sent me the following message. This is the entire e-mail—it’s just one line—but if you divide it into three lines, one short sentence per line, as Mark so often did in his e-mails, it becomes like one of Mark’s haiku:

**Nature is HUGE.
Mark is going to be there.
You'll find him.**

Let him be a stone in clear running water, the yellow evening light in Central Park, the moon reflected in a pond.