

Catch 41

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Catch 41 – Colin Stewart Jones

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Foreword

Colin Stewart Jones is a crafty one. I say this because his newest book—***Catch 41***—hides in plain sight. It may be obvious that 41 in the title refers to the number of poems in the collection and yet I had to inquire of him what the title referred to: he likes to play and playing with language is the essence of poetry; it makes clear that what is transparent is actually opaque or obscure. For instance, take this phrase from one of Paul Celan's poems: "how clarity troubles." Why does it trouble? Because it deludes us into thinking we understand to such an extent that we respond like automatons, asleep, when the associations, connotations, ambiguity of words are endless. As the poet Robert Kelly said, "We sleep in language if language does not come to wake us with its strangeness."

Take the title again. The word "catch" seems clear, as in "catch the movie, it's great," or "be sure to catch the game." It means see it, don't miss it. Yet the word "catch" has other ways of being interpreted. It is an imperative. As noted above, the word "catch" in the title could just as well mean be alert, here it comes, "here, catch," so the reader is being advised to pay attention where they might not otherwise. Or the word might be both a command and a challenge to see if you can "Catch 41."

What I am suggesting is that ambiguity is at play all the time in language.

As the eminent scholar William Empson opens his seminal book ***7 Types of Ambiguity***:

In a significantly extended sense any prose statement could be called ambiguous...each simple statement may be translated into a complicated statement which employs other terms...and each such complexity may again be analyzed into a simple series...Explanation, by choice of terms, may be carried in any direction the explainer wishes.

What Colin Stewart Jones does with content he also does with the form of the book, following that modernist credo “form follows content (or function).”

If the poems are haiku (and it is uncertain whether or not they are meant to be), they are not written in the conventional one or three lines that the genre is usually composed in. Colin intentionally writes the poems in four lines. It is not a revolution, but it does “awaken” the reader by its strangeness of language and the formatting of it.

And, to insinuate play into his poems to awaken the reader from the dullness created by tradition, he writes each poem in 17 syllables, the traditional Japanese number of sound units of haiku, even though Americans now eschew this usage. So, we have 17 syllable poems, which could not be more traditional, in 4 line poems, which could not be more unconventional. As I said, Colin Stewart Jones is a crafty one. He plays without agreement, which the language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said was the very nature of language (except for a language game to be accepted and used, agreement is

essential). Colin is to that extent quite iconoclastic.

This reveals itself in the content of his poems. You won't find picturesque, prettified, saccharine poems in **Catch 41**. This is crucial to his method and purpose. As the poet Mark Wallace, who judged the Scorpion Prize for Roadrunner Journal 12:2 is quoted as saying in the Roadrunner Blog:

Whenever I read haiku written by contemporary U.S. writers (and there are many haiku out there), I note two main problems that limit the work from being as intriguing as it might. Both have to do with misunderstandings about the history of haiku.

The first problem: the idea that the primary goal of a haiku, in its compact syllables, is to create beautiful images. It's true that haiku can be beautiful, yet more crucial than beauty to the haiku is that the image should tell us something significant, often even conflicted, about the human world, or the natural world, and frequently about their relation to each other. A haiku should reveal to us something about the world that we don't understand or never have said as compactly. Seventeen syllables can be enough to frame a profound insight or define a powerful conflict.

The second problem, connected to the first: that this beautiful image should exclusively portray nature or humans within a wholly natural setting. In the context of the contemporary U.S., this misunderstanding turns the resulting haiku

into exercises in nostalgia, in how to picture human life as free of industrialization, commercialization, or the morass of politics and manipulative media language. Yet although the great writers of haiku usually know the haiku tradition well, the goal of the best haiku has never been simply to imitate the past. Instead, the great writers of haiku take the tradition and do something that's both unique and reflects its own moment of composition, not the past, in a way that acknowledges haiku tradition but extends it.

Let's have a look at the opening poem of ***Catch 41***, as it represents the antithesis of the problems noted above.

Sing little bird
sing to me
before the fag-end
of another day.

Colin plays with the nursery rhyme quality of traditional haiku in the first two lines, writing of song birds (haiku used to be called singing the birds and flowers), using the word "little" to emphasize the quaintness of it, the repetition of "sing," as if poetry was and must be musical. Then abruptly he undercuts and sabotages the initial edifice in the last two lines: sundown is not rendered in the colorful, beautiful way it usually is, but rather as the burning out of a cigarette butt of yet "another" (tedium) day.

Or in this poem, he again rejects a simple and beautiful natural scene so common in

conventional haiku:

The sparrow-hawk
starts to pull out
all the crow's feathers
before he eats.

A rather strange neatness the sparrow-hawk has, cleaning, pulling out all the feathers of the crow, before he eats.

Colin also rejects reading into nature, attributing all sorts of moods and emotions to it and from it that is another hallmark of conventional haiku. Here's an example:

The old moon
frozen to the spot
I read no story
in the night sky.

Colin Stewart Jones's poems/stories are of his own making. He owns them. They are his vision, an original vision, a true vision. He doesn't take winter and its frozen state—the old moon frozen to the spot—as meaning, as it has none. Colin Stewart Jones gives us his emotions, his thoughts, his truths, his bravery, his insights.

Colin is a valued contemporary poet and his latest book—**Catch 41**—should be read by all those interested in progressive versions of short verse. While I began by saying he is playful, I neglected to say that play can be serious.

—Jack Galmitz, N.Y., N.Y., Jan 2013

Sing little bird
sing to me
before the fag-end
of another day.

The old moon
frozen to the spot
I read no story
in the night sky.

From a distance
the knobbed oak
looks like it has many
old men's noses.

The sparrow-hawk
starts to pull out
all the crow's feathers
before he eats.

A blackbird skips
over the ground
forgetting the snow
in April sun.

Sculpted by
nights not shared
though my face is
not unlike it used to be.

I'm told I've
a thousand yard stare
and dirty socks
block my way to bed.

This lovely trout
undone by a worm,
and tourists complain
about the rain?

A blackbird
on the window sill
wiping dust from
the geraniums.

My grief
is not so bad
as these daybreak kisses
through the letterbox.

The sound of engines
and working girls
idling
at Aberdeen Harbour.

Under the oak
a ladybird, yes ladybird
paints your cheek
deep red.

Why did
a mallard follow me
across the bridge
expecting something?

We argue
over the exact shade:
a hint of peach
behind the clouds.

Still drunk
I wake coughing
and my clothes on your floor
in a piss-wet pile.

Life will change
seed planted
perhaps a short nap
before I cut the grass.

Supping the last dreg
from my cup
as the crow flies
over a sunrise.

Sounds of the sea
from my souvenirs
and bloody sand
inside my ears.

Under the baking
hot July sun
a bay horse
rolls in its shadow.

During high summer
people often wipe
their shoes on
the grass round here.

A half moon
knitted black by clouds
pretending to listen
to The Blues.

A gold finch
defends his territory
from a wind-blown
plastic bag.

A wren pokes out
from behind the fence
my misery
fresh each morning.

It's a jackdaw
maybe turning
the earth into that
smell of autumn.

Again that voice
somewhere in the sky
squeezing shadows
from a dark shape.

Floating on
this lover's moon
I'll drink on knowing
I've been fooled again.

So this life
is a dewdrop
yet not mine to choose
if the flowers fall.

Maybe one day
I will eat
fly agaric and run
like the red deer.

When night falls
only then can I see
my finger-marks
on the glass panes.

Drunken leaves
partnering my footsteps
through forgotten
autumnal days.

The squirrel's tail
waves a goodbye
to my reflection
in the window.

At my Doctor's
I watch the autumn wind
reduce the rose
to a stick.

Above all song
of the other birds
one hushed crow
in a leafless tree.

There are no leaves
on the whitebeam
yet rainbows
in every raindrop.

The cold moon
turns me into
a dormant tree
awaiting the spring.

I flick
the last grain of rice
and kid on
it is now a winter star.

Out of smokes
crows gather in
my early morning
run for tobacco.

I no longer count
the screams of gulls
tearing holes
in my waking dream.

How easily I hold
this winter sun
in its place
with just a squint.

And grains of salt
from a passing lorry
give me something
to walk on.

Carved in stone
the crow unable to fly
in less than
eighteen syllables

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Acutely observed, Colin Stewart Jones' new volume of poetry "Catch 41" reveals his world for us with the amused clarity of Ryokan and the open honesty of Issa. Never one to pull his punches, Jones again exposes the 'poseurs' of Japanese Short-Form poetry by his faithfulness to its ethos, and his use of a strict syllabic count in four lines, throughout the collection. Jones is saying something profound about form and content, with a consistently startling and engaging collection which blows us away with its poetic integrity.

—Susan Shand.

Catch 41 is not Basho's old frog pond nor is it Crapsey's cinquains or Robert Kelly's lunes. No, this is something entirely new with a twist of the familiar. This is not the stripped back, neutral English of most haiku either; Colin's voice comes through loud and clear. For a keen haiku poet such as myself, reading *Catch 41* was a shock to the system, but of the best kind. Is this a fairly dramatic, possible reworking of the form, the ghost of haiku future maybe? Or are we seeing a new poetic form entirely? This work moves from the sublime to the grounded and funny, from wild life to the love life smoothly and with great finesse. The writing is engaging and playful. This work is one you will treasure, go back to time and again and it may possibly inspire other writers to explore this emergent form.

—Violette Rose-Jones.

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