

then I must go to the Mountain:  
(space reserved) for Marlene Mountain

by Jack Galmitz



Perhaps it is a truism to say that reading the works of Marlene Mountain is equivalent to reading the history of haiku in English, but some truisms bear repeating and this one certainly qualifies. There has not been a poet of her stature to emerge in the field since she first started writing haiku in the 1960s and her poetry began with a bang not a whimper or, keeping with T.S. Eliot, her “end is in her beginning.” So, I will begin by following the injunction of Eliot’s master craftsman, Ezra Pound, who recommended young poets to first read their contemporaries and then read backwards in literary time. I will begin with Marlene Mountain’s most recent work that appears in [\*Haiku 21\*](#) (Modern Haiku Press, 2011) working backwards, or slantwise, towards her beginnings. Time doesn’t seem so imperative when analyzing Ms. Mountain’s work, because from the beginning she was experimenting with the haiku form, never satisfied to fulfill the expectations or demands of the then paradigms set forth by the existing patriarchal order.

Let’s have a look at one of the poems in *Haiku 21*:

out of nowhere isn’t

We can possibly make “sense” of this poem by interpreting “out of nowhere” as a non-existent category, an “isn’t.” However, we can just as well,

and this seems more plausible, consider the poem as an instance of what Richard Gilbert called “dis-completion,” that is: a poem that disallows completion, “disassembles attempts at reaching a significant coherent meaning-at the same time as meaning is being posed” ([R'r Blog, 1/2/12 comment](#)). Professor Gilbert considers such poems as codicils of expectation that are thwarted, so much so that the very definition of haiku as a genre is threatened, retreated from. This is Marlene Mountain at her best, but she achieves similar disassembling even in language games that are more familiar:

a loss of content shapes painted over left to their own design

Is this Ms. Mountain's Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. (Dover, 1977)? Content, matter, what matters, what we hold on to for dear life is lost, leaving shapes painted (colors and figures as meaning and structure, composition), and yet they still create a design, only their own, not ours. I can't think of another haiku in the English language that commands such respect for the accidental, the random, operating outside the boundaries of our rules. (Lest it be forgotten, Marlene Mountain is also an artist and has been painting for as long as she has been writing haiku). Here is another poem in a similar vein, where Ms. Mountain leaves things be, doesn't impose meaning where meaning is not (and does so ironically in the medium that most signifies, that by its nature is signifying, that is language):

left to itself a moon without subtitles

She is not afraid to deprive herself, her reader, with the preparation necessary to understand, to offer the rules, the schema, and this creates dislocation, disorientation:

along with wind and mud and whatever that means if anything

She demonstrates the post-modernist ability to keep an open text, to achieve what the semiotic philosopher and novelist Umberto Eco required of the poet: “I would define the poetic effect as the capacity that a text displays for continuing to generate different readings, without ever being consumed.” ([thinkexist.com/quotes/umberto\\_eco](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/umberto_eco)).

And, while she has said of herself that she was always serious, even as a child, she can be self-deprecating while simultaneously referencing her signature (Mountain as related to hills in the below poem), her trace of presence in absence:

toward old as the hills ungracefully

Let’s go back to 1977 (all time is synchronous). Marlene Mountain at that time wrote a haiku that had no content other than the formal requirements of the genre: it was more than a meta-poem, it was a demonstration of the emptiness of the formal in-and-of-itself, an aside to those who were seeking a similitude to the Japanese haiku; Note its 5-7-5 formatting:

-- ---;

- - - - -

- - - - .

*(Tweed 6:1 1977)*

Here are a few more examples of her enticingly provocative style, her language play with the haiku form, the replacement of words for punctuation marks, the replacement of words for numerals, all in the service of disengaging the reader from the routine reading of haiku:

Frog semi colon  
and more sounds now ellipsis  
the night period

(*Tweed* 5:4 6 1977)

too purfick hikoo:

5; 5  
7 7;  
5 5

(*Tweed* 6:1 1977)

five-seven-five haik(u)!

five five five five five  
seven seven seven sev  
five five five five five

(*Tweed* 6:1 1977; poems cited in *RAW NerVZ*, 1995)

Besides experimenting with inherited form, technique, and semantics, Marlene Mountain was an early practitioner of cut-up in haiku (which William

S. Burroughs used in the 1950s and 60s as alternatives to linear narrative), as well as multi-media haiku, where she used pictures along with words to convey meaning. She was also amongst the first to create concrete poems as haiku. Her experiments in the formalities of the haiku genre long preceded similar strains later engaged in by other practitioners of the form. Here is one of her cut-ups:



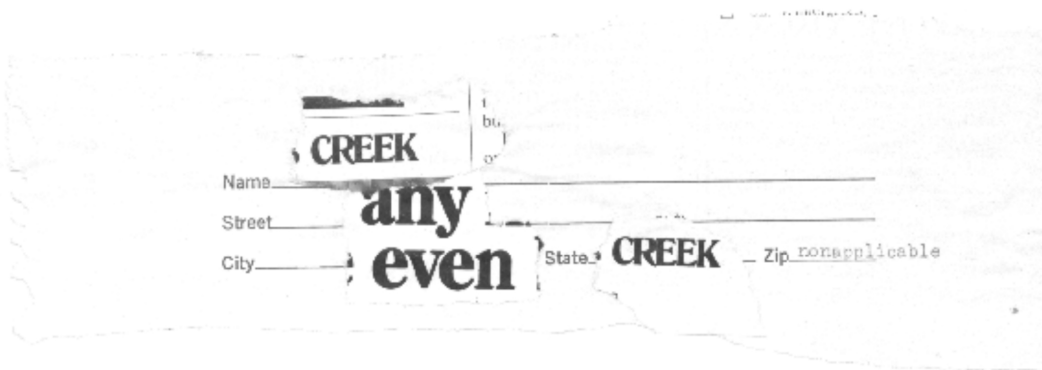
Here is an example of one of her concrete poems:

l l  
a a a a  
b b b b  
i i i i  
u u u u  
m m

Here is another cut-up, though it doesn't disturb linearity, but uses mixed media as an intermediary in meaning:



She often used these pictograms to convey new contexts within which the reader could re-imagine the world they inhabited; here is a particularly ingenious use of this technique, returning “words” of nature into a piece of paper designed for completely different purposes (say an application of some kind).



Besides her body of experimental haiku, Marlene Mountain challenged the conventional rule that haiku must contain two juxtaposed images and that no other format was acceptable. She took up the struggle alone to insist that one-image haiku was not only permissible, but was used by the ancient haiku poets. Remember, this argument was advanced in 1978, just as the women’s movement was beginning to gain momentum, at the cross-roads of cultural change, and Ms. Mountain seemingly took on the male-dominated haiku world alone. It took no small courage to confront the gatekeepers of haiku about what was and was not permitted in the writing of haiku. The essay, “one image haiku,” was not only an academic exercise, but marked the turning of an avant-garde poet into a radical, politicized, feminist poet.

It was not merely that Marlene Mountain re-introduced what had always existed in haiku (in Japan), that is, the one-image poem, but that she did so as the “rules” governing the writing of haiku were being consolidated and solidified by a community of writers who had formed a hegemony and dictated to practitioners what was appropriate. To this day, there are some writers of the genre who would insist that anything other than the conventional two-part haiku, one part juxtaposed to the other, is the only viable form for haiku. But, art does not flourish within strictures. Though there is validity to the two image haiku, to require writers to replicate this form in each and every instance is to turn this poetry into the equivalent of following instructions on how to make a paper airplane, or, with some more sophistication, into origami. For those interested in her parsing of modern and ancient examples of the one-image haiku, [her essay is available on-line](#).

It was at this juncture in her career as a poet that the women’s movement gained more recognition and pervasive influence in the West, and Marlene Mountain re-created herself as an activist, feminist poet. Much was at stake culturally surrounding the issue—five thousand years of male dominance of societies—and Marlene Mountain gave the strength and talent of her voice to challenge the patriarchal. While some of her poems from this period no doubt might seem polemical, there are more that are simply good poetry, poetry bearing a message. She was not didactic: she was enraged. There are many sources of instances of her feminist writings: one such is an essay entitled “shetrillogy.” It is a long narrative essay in which Ms. Mountain creates words to portray the patriarchal view of history up until the present moment and replace it with a new woman-language (1987). There are some marvelous poems included in the essay, poems that speak to the feminine as an equal and balancing valence to the male, as well as some that make of womanhood a “wholeness” unto itself or a shared experience with other women. Here are some samples from [“womocreativa”](#):



i am no beginning i am no end

i am chaoscoswommos

from my womwomb all is

from my gynitals all flows

shesharing i will make myself into ourselves

sheyes again i will shegive a big birth

birth of wom harvest of wom

Before moving on to further examples of her feminist haiku, it seems important to have a look at a self-interview she conducted in 1982 that was published in *Wind Chimes* #6. The work was titled “two femmarks, inner:review,” and it explores her views on writing and feminism (and note that she had to divide herself within/without to find a sponsor of the dialogue; the lack of a credible male interviewer speaks volumes to the tone of that time). In fact, the imaginary interviewer questions the validity of Ms. Mountain’s haiku in just the way one would expect: that she makes up words, that she emphasizes ideas rather than images, that rather than seek “oneness,” so important to earlier practitioners of the art and still considerably important to those writing today, she poses un-oneness. For instance, the imaginary interviewer points out that her word “taliswoman,” is not a real word and is an intellectualization. Ms. Mountain answers in a most illuminating way:

My moment of awareness was that 'talisman' is a concept, a made-up word. Mankind is a made-up word. If you understand that 'man' is not a generic term, but a political idea (that was an overwhelming moment keenly perceived), then the feminization of a word can be a natural response. Or in my case, 'taliswoman' was a hit-on-the-head-with-a- stick. A leap. A breakthrough. Now I'm giving you the word, the leap.

I: Aren't you asking us to accept an intellectualization?

M: Not to accept is the intellectualization. In one second the word/moment can become a part of you. Mary Daly, in her discussion of therapist, gives us a word—hits us on the head: the/rapist.<sup>1</sup> That's very immediate to me.

I: She doesn't call that a haiku, does she?

M: I call mine haiku.

I: And your definition of haiku?

M: How 'bout, life?

I: Is that all?

M: That's a lot.

Regarding the un-oneness haiku, Marlene Mountain gives us a wrenching example of the common world-wide practice of female castration:

clitoris of the four year old removed

In order to appreciate Ms. Mountain's poems of politics, it is necessary to understand that in retrospect and prospect they were/are radical, that is, further examples of her expansive, experimental writings: they are not to be understood as vagaries of an established normative form. She gives the context

within which her poems are to be interpreted in another self-interview: [“innerview”](#) (1981). Here she defines the changes her poetry underwent when she became aware that poetry was always political, that she had previous to her politically engaged poetry simply been naïve. As she said somewhere, “I will not have content taken from me.” Here is a sample from “innerview”:

Though progress has been slow, and repression still abounds, woman has begun to regain some of her rightful rights. The image of woman, however, remains clouded with many many misrepresentations. It is in this light, and for these reasons, that a piece such as Yarrow's—with either a covert or an overt reading—can be effective in establishing a spiritual bond with the past, and in restoring woman's original image.

I: You're throwing haiku into the political realm.

M: It's already there. In an age such as ours, omission is as much political as . . .

I: Haiku is not . . .

M: Haiku can be a lot more than pears and yellow windows.

I: Why do you insist upon stressing the political and the female?

M: I'm not stressing the political, rather, I am recognizing its existence, and within this recognition I am involved in reexamining the direction, potential, and truth of both my painting and haiku. At first, I felt that the potential of painting was wide open and that haiku had many built-in limitations. Now, I've come to see it was my own preconception of haiku that was the limitation. I no longer see haiku as a 'pure' art form, protected from the climate of the times.

*Women's Art/Art As Activism. For me now that's all one word. Woman as Protest. Woman as Spiritual. Woman as Physical. Woman as Autonomous. Woman as Herself, by*

*the very fact of living in a patriarchal world, is Political. And along with that, as She says this and does that, She is an Activist. ([“art as activism,”](#) 1987)*

Marlene Mountain wanted to create a new language game, one with new rules (with as little equivocation as possible), without aporia, that addressed “identity” in a new way. This is what raises her art above mere didacticism. She has a whole series of what she called “pissed off poems and crosswords,” the crosswords being a pun on the everyday play of language game in newspapers and magazines, now cross=angry. She wrote a series of poems under the rubric “late night without mahler” (1985), Mahler being referenced perhaps because of his womanizing tendencies and dictatorial conducting manner. In the following poem, we see the objectification of the objectifier:

exhibition of women by male artists

And, in one poem she points to the fact that even language, which seems gender neutral, is not:

thousands of women gather and talk in spite of language

And in “rain a nature sequence,” (1985), we can see just one example of why this is so:

ruins the flow of language to correct the sexism

change every he to da see how he da feels

In “i grow older,” (1985) she shows us what it is she is challenging:

not against men in general just generals and

autumn nears a gun sale

And, in order to be true, she was daring enough to seem politically incorrect, whereas she was being politically correct: “coretta: [10/85]”

coretta: he never once mentioned women's oppression

coretta: he never once mentioned women's oppression

coretta: he never once mentioned women's oppression

coretta: he never once mentioned women's oppression

coretta: he never once mentioned women's oppression

*(Wind Chimes #18; Women and Language)*

She even created art in conjunction with her haiku that served to illustrate (as in a crossword puzzle) the language of patriarchy:

HAD FLESH HUSSY  
 A E V S O  
 S R FERTILITYFETISH  
 L P I L O E C  
 ICY LADY O MERMAID  
 M E ROMP M R  
 Y MADONNA EVE I LUV  
 U Y P D FUN E I R  
 STRUMPET A H T R  
 E P D CHATTEL G  
 H H A A I  
 C VAMP B A SLATTERN  
 U E I O S E A  
 MISS NAUGHTY SOILED  
 B S U G E N O  
 USE DUP H BROTHEL  
 C L T W E L  
 K SEXY BITCHGODDESS  
 E L I  
 T ONEANDONLY PRUDE

M OLDMASTERS  
 YANG A I B L  
 C PHALLICWORSHIP K  
 H E E O L K  
 GODDESSMURDER C L E F  
 A Y L O A F  
 M M WITCHBURNINGS T I B T  
 AMEN O H T C O Y E  
 L M B T O C Y R  
 S N PATRIARCH R A Y S I R  
 C MANSWORLD M S I D W L  
 H W A A H S L E I K  
 HOLR GODSAID L A S L E I K  
 A MANKIND Y W E T I B E S O N  
 R D O W A R D N B O Y  
 S G R D Y B O Y  
 H ANTIFEMINISM  
 I A  
 P HISTORYOELIES

of females and the opposite of males:



Marlene Mountain also had a vision of God as the alibi of patriarchy and parochialism: she produced some startling mixed media works to illustrate her views/feelings:



As inventive, as critical, as important as Marlene Mountain's haiku history has been, there have been her detractors: their denial of her work as haiku results from their definition of haiku: the Haiku Society of America (HSA) formed a committee to define the genre (as if consensus was the method to arrive at truth). For them, haiku is and will always remain "a 'Japanese poem recording the essence of a moment keenly perceived, in which Nature is linked to human nature.'"

Hiroaki Sato, in his essay "Divergences in Haiku" (a speech given in 1999 to the HSA) says in this view of haiku, the 'haiku moment,' however defined, is



crucial. Sato also stated that, as Cor van den Heuvel says with uncharacteristic politeness in the foreword to the third edition of his *The Haiku Anthology* (W. Norton, 1999), what Marlene Mountain calls ‘pissed off poems,’ for example—pieces that ‘express her outrage at what we have done and are doing to harm the environment and to limit the freedom of women’—are, ‘however admirable, something other than haiku or senryu.’

Mr. Sato does not take a stand, at least directly, but offers a series of haiku by Ms. Mountain, calls them haiku, which in itself is illuminating, and then says many would not consider them as haiku. Here are the poems/series in question:

well, just who the hell do you think fucked it up, caterpillars

spring in america water unsafe food unsafe sex unsafe

i'm committed to your maleness even more to the moon's femaleness

scratched into the mountain shadows of the moon

a dirty business but someone has to be mother nature

Perhaps the appraisal of Marlene Mountain that is most important of all comes from Haruo Shirane, author of the influential book *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Bashō* (Stanford University Press, 1998): [in 2001, he wrote to her:](#)

Dear Marlene,

I consider [William J.] Higginson to be a close friend and I admire his work greatly, but here I must offer a different opinion with regard to your work. Whether or not it fits some definition of haiku is of little relevance in the larger picture. The fact is that it is superior poetry, much superior to almost the entire body of what has been narrowly defined in North America as \*haiku.\* Basho, like his great rival, Saikaku, felt that it was not form that counted, it was the poetry, the quality of the words, how it could move the reader. In their younger years, they broke all kinds of rules. Saikaku was criticized severely, and was told he was just \*blowing dust.\* But it was in the process of breaking rules that these poet often made their greatest poetic achievements. Great poets don't stick to rules; they make their own. You belong in that company.

To put it another way, what was most important for Basho was what was called \*haikai spirit,\* to be constantly seeking new horizons, new forms, new words, new emotions. (See my book, *Traces of Dreams.*) In my view, you have that spirit.

Haruo Shirane (Columbia University)

A similar opinion of the work of Marlene Mountain is offered by Professor Richard Gilbert. In his essay titled "[A Very Warm Mountain](#)," (*Frogpond* 27:2, 2004) he introduces the essay with one of Ms. Mountain's poems:

autumn mist oak leaves left to rust

(*Frogpond* 26:1, 2003)

He says Ms. Mountain has "crafted an oeuvre which offers numerous haiku re-conceptualizations in the *gendai* spirit, an important term from the Japanese haiku tradition meaning 'modern, contemporary.' Mountain offers readers a range of possibilities for presenting contemporary social issues in haiku, and

importantly, through her prevalent one-line form, has presented *gendai* reconceptualizations of the natural in haiku.”

He goes on to say of the poem noted supra:

“The above haiku is one of her more imagistically concrete poems: even the register shift of “rust” coming at the end of the line remains strongly visual. But “rust” creates imagistic irruption and so, naturalistic irruption. Does rust reinforce the sense of season? This is how irruption seems to create a tension, in terms of nature. The uneasiness; rust instead of russet; rust as weathering metal, as *technos* not *geos*. Rust is sometimes sharp-edged, ragged, something that gets you cut (so, cutting), infected; the feeling of decay deforms any rising romanticism concerning beauty of the leaves of the autumn oak in mist. It also seems that the irruptive collocation “mist oak” really catalyzes this unease; this language seems to rebel against meaning, forcing us out of the poem, so we lose contact with the natural, with the naturalness of the read-image, read naturally. Then the power of rust (vivid, solid color, substance) throws us back in again, but as garbage, detritus: cast-off or broken. And yes it’s the leaves turning, dying, drying out. But we can’t quite accept this in a facile way.

And why is that important — not to believe? Yes, why should we lose our belief in how we habitually find nature? Just perhaps, nature tainted by the consciousness of language is more honest, in a surprising way. Why may this be? It is painful to look at the truth of our contemporary relationship with nature. The field of literary ecocriticism, shared by Le Guin and Mountain, offers us relevant contemplations which directly impend upon haiku. While there are a number of avenues to consider, one that strikes me in relation to Mountain’s haiku is that of Bill McKibben, whose 1991 book *The End of Nature* showed us that human civilization has lost, in our time, is the very *idea* of nature as something apart, indomitable, pure: the molecules our biosphere have now been altered by human civilization. From global warming and ocean temperature-rise to acid rain and ozone holes, no heretofore natural biome remains unaffected. In another text, *The Abstract Wild*, Jack Turner shows how the wilds have been converted to managed zones. How can haiku deal with

these new truths, concerning relationships between nature and society?

Does “pure” nature even exist, except as a romantic concept?

Contemplating such deformations of nature and the wild, it may be said that at this point in time, naturalistic haiku are highly artificial. And conversely, that there is a strange and rather mysterious naturalness that arises from deformation. James Hillman discusses this in terms of the need for the pathologic in soul-making — it’s become very difficult to recover nature through either romantic or naive modes. This is one reason why the realism-inspired *shasei* representation style of Shiki, which we have been following as a main haiku guideline, is limited. Not irrelevant by any means, but partial. [. . .]

Questions such as “where is the wild,” and “what is nature” must likely be relevant for poets these days, and they are crucial questions for haiku. Coupled with these questions are the polemics of haiku viz nature. It would be ironic indeed, witnessing increasing ecological chaos, to leaf through page-after-page of picaresque juxtapositional haiku scenes of serene contemplation — some future literature might well ask, “what were those people thinking?” These days, our zeitgeist demands fresh poetic responses to our global predicament. One dimension of Mountain's search has been to artfully seek the wild in haiku, with a rare and unflinching honesty, and in doing so provide approaches that challenge us to reflect honestly upon our time, and the poetic and political relevance of the modern haiku tradition.”

Then, we have from the website [tempuslibres.org](http://tempuslibres.org) the following assessment of Ms. Mountain’s life and work:

Haiku as a protest.

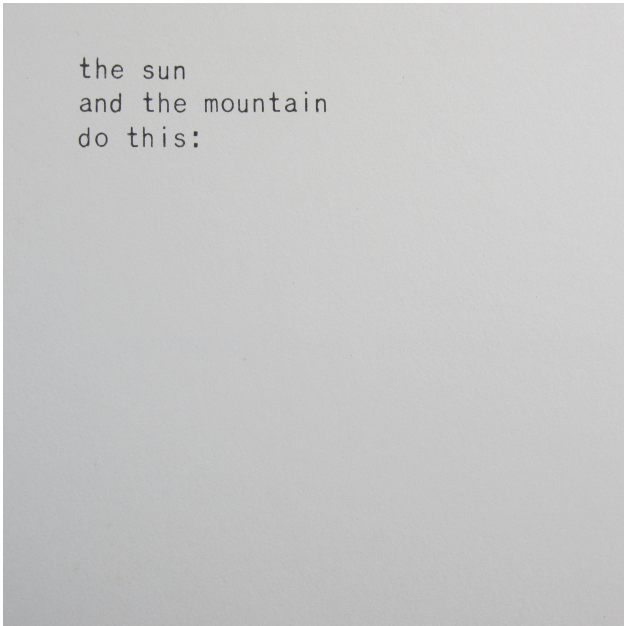
A strong speech, committed haiku, far from Zen, but also important essays about a new conception of haiku. A profession of faith to assert her female identity, to tell women sufferings (‘a poll’), problems of the world.

A woman on her feet, who talks straight, about Life.

Marlène Mountain, feminist. Impossible to forget.

Such compelling praise of her work easily over-rides the negative views offered of her life's work. It has been a remarkably diverse, innovative, experimental work from its beginnings to the present.

But now, let's go back to the beginning, as this essay opened with Eliot's "her end is in her beginning." The first book Ms. Mountain published was titled *[the old tin roof](#)* (1976). There are some haiku in the volume that already play with language; for instance, the following poem leaves off on a colon thus pointing to nothing, or the unfathomable, as if only an empty space suffices to explain what precedes it:



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the sun  
and the mountain  
do this:
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Or, again, there is a poem with extra spaces between words, emphasizing the nowhere that the buzzard, the scavenger, the bird of ill-omen and carrion, occupies:

buzzard nowhere into nowhere

Then, she writes a poem that moves backwards:

backroad summer

in a mountain

follow

She includes a poem with a word missing letters, a visualization of the one word of the poem:

sn wfl k s

Here is her interesting take on what was then haiku's emphasis on the present moment, but without the pseudo-epiphany; she arranges it as an equation with a understated calculation and remainder:

tonight  
less tomorrow  
will do

Finally, she includes a portion of language as meaning as a poem: the suffix, meaning action or process, the result of an action or process, something used in an action or process, something related to:




There is another poem that merits our attention, inasmuch as it repeats a single phrase three times in order to present, concretely, the action of the phrase:

newly plowed field  
newly plowed field  
newly plowed field

The book also contains some one word poems, such as the following:

furrow

crow



krik'it

In 1986, Marlene Mountain, in the essay [“will I ever get myself explained? \(a partial autobiography\)”](#) speaks to her relationship to haiku as one of attachment, but not a cozy, comfortable attachment. There came a time when she felt haiku was too detached from the real world and human condition. Yet, she felt haiku could accommodate that real world. In her words,

Have I gone beyond what haiku is—its particular, perhaps peculiar, view of the world? Its quietness in the middle of a battlefield, its reverence of nature in the middle of irreverence, its simplicity in the middle of chaos? I don't think so. I've merely brought that 'other side' of life into haiku. (Perhaps, I've pushed.) The battlefield, the irreverence, the chaos are a part of us and, therefore (as I've come to see it), are haiku.

Suffice it to say, Marlene Mountain has been and continues to be one of the most restive, experimental, contentious, controversial, and important figures in the world of haiku. She has not slowed down, even in age, as her poems in *Haiku 21* demonstrate. Her accomplishments: one of the first to experiment in the use of one-line haiku, one of the first to concentrate on concrete/visual haiku, one of the first to use mixed media/collage as an expression of surprising meaning in haiku, one of the first to incorporate the political/gender identity in haiku, the first to question the necessity of a two-image structure in haiku, the first to use empty diagrams or words in place of substantives or numerals to express the mere formalism of haiku, and one of



the first to use spacing of words and letters in unusual ways to elicit further meaning than is usually found in haiku. She is, in short, a giant in the field of haiku poetry. Let's end with a somewhat enigmatical poem she wrote, one that exemplifies her sensitivity, her constant human need for association and closeness to others, her ability to invoke aporia to expand rather than to retract meaning:

close to someone in the stars white seeps inward



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