

British Haiku Society International Ken and Noragh Jones Haibun Award, 2017.

Sleight of Mind

by David Bingham, UK

Some people need to know how he pulls the shining light bulbs from his mouth, levitates above the stage or escapes from a straightjacket.

Me, I like the mystery of it; the explanations are always so mundane. True magic lies in the imagination.

Switching off the rational mind. Letting yourself go and trusting the conjuror.

I do it with words. Like how I brought you here. Even if you asked me, I couldn't tell you how it's done.

*snowdrops ...
mistaking 'what is'
for 'what isn't'*

Stella Pierides writes:

Winner: Sleight of Mind, by David Bingham, UK

Sleight of Mind refreshingly starts with placing the reader in the magician's audience. Our minds' eyes are glued to the shining light bulbs coming out of his mouth, his miraculously escaping from the straightjacket. The title, and the opening main clause, have warned us: this is a trick! Yet, in focusing on the 'what,' rather than the 'how' posed in the question, in a momentary suspension of disbelief, we fall for it, allowing the magic world centre stage.

How is it done? How does magic work, and how does the magic of haibun work to enable us to re-experience the writer's epiphany and emotional truth? There is no answer here, only a question well put. Hopefully, there won't be an answer anyway soon – though the poet, as well as we, know that there are perfectly 'mundane explanations' for the magician's conjuring tricks and, to some extent, the haibuneer's craft!

This is the haibun that kept me going back to read and re-read, finding new things as I followed its vertical axis. From the child-like awe ('switching off the rational mind') in the beginning of the prose, to nature brought in by the snowdrops in the haiku at the end, it leads the reader from illusion and mystery (the stage) to questioning and reflection (snowdrops and pondering what is) putting flesh on the bones of an old question about reality, perception and the mind. From associations to the Allegory of the Cave to reference (in the title) to wizardry as well as a neuroscience book on magic and perception, this brief haibun affords a variety of possible readings and stretches the reach of the form.

In having the narrator directly address the reader in short, sparse sentences the piece achieves immediacy, reinforcing the illusion of involvement. Weaving skilfully together the constituent elements of haibun (title, prose, haiku, content), it engages this reader on so many levels, and wins!