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Haiku for recovery: An immersive workshop

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Haiku for recovery: An immersive workshop

Abstract:

Haiku are grounded in the appreciation of nature and specific experiences. They lend themselves to being workshopped and to initiating, more broadly, editing strategies that may also be useful in other contexts. This essay, about an immersive teaching practice, focuses on the qualities of haiku for maximum engagement in a short period of time. The method has been developed by the author whilst acting as a creative writing mentor for the Australian Defence Force Arts for Recovery, Resilience, Teamwork and Skills program at the University of Canberra, a partnership with the Australian Defence Force. Participants have had little or no previous exposure to haiku. The workshop is in four stages: a discussion introducing examples of haiku for discussion; a haiku walk; an editing session conducted on a large white board; and a "haiku checklist" to take away and continue working with. This checklist offers a core of information on writing haiku, distilled from the discussion of guidelines, which will be useful for teachers. The inclusion of a selection of examples from participants demonstrates how an immersive teaching process can instil the essentials of the haiku form in a relatively short span of time.

Biographical note:

Owen Bullock has published three collections of poetry, five books of haiku and a novella, the most recent being *Summer Haiku* (2019) and *Work & Play* (2017). His research interests include haikai literature, poetic processes, semiotics and poetry, prose poetry, collaboration, and creative arts therapies and wellbeing. His scholarly work has appeared in *Antipodes, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Arts Therapy, Axon, Journal of New Zealand Literature, Ka Mate Ka Ora, New Writing, Qualitative Inquiry* and *TEXT*. Owen has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Canberra, where he currently teaches, and has a website for his research into poetry and process, at https://poetry-in-process.com/

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Introduction

In the genre of poetry, the form of haiku could be considered poetry concentrate. Like all poetry, haiku's attention to detail celebrates and values the world we live in, our experiences, and the small things that can delight us and teach us about larger issues. Haiku emphasise experience in a work of great compression, often in a moment of epiphany or reflection that is grounded in an appreciation of nature, and without mental commentary. They take implication and suggestion in poetry to a kind of extreme, whilst still delighting in the use of fresh and simple language.

Writing and publishing haiku since 2000 and teaching haiku and related forms since 2007, I have developed a highly effective method of teaching haiku in an immersive workshop. The method has been developed while acting as a creative writing mentor for the Arts for Recovery, Resilience, Teamwork and Skills (ARRTS) program at the University of Canberra, in partnership with the Australian Defence Force. Participants have been diagnosed with PTSD or anxiety disorders, and come from all three services, with the most recent programs also including emergency services personnel. They currently choose from three creative streams – Music & Rhythm, Visual Arts and Creative Writing – for the bulk of the four-week program (there is also one "whole-of-program" activity each day and a number of group field trips). The mentors are "artist educators", rather than arts therapists (a rationale explained in a previous article, see Williams et al., 2020). We recently completed the 11th program, over 6 years. The program has so far helped 246 personnel. The haiku workshop usually takes place towards the end of the first week in the creative writing stream.

Haiku are set in the present and encourage awareness of the world around us and help reduce focus on the self. Its engagement with the environment assists new writers in developing powers of observation. Haiku have been noted in the literature for increasing creativity and sensitivity to the world, in ways which assist recovery (Stephenson & Rosen, 2015). Haiku poet and editor Scott Mason argues that spending time with haiku fosters participation and a greater sense of engagement with the environment (Mason, 2017, p. 215). Effectively, haiku is a form of mindfulness, reflected in the fact that, historically, many practitioners have practised meditation and followed Buddhist or Zen teachings. In the context of a conversation about mindfulness strategies encountered with their psychologist, one ARRTS participant remarked "what's haiku if it's not mindfulness?"; other participants have also made this link. Exploring the connection between haiku and mindfulness will be the subject of future research.

The teaching approach of ARRTS encourages participants to build a new identity as potential writers. Haiku encourage and develop specific poetic descriptions rather than generalised statements, and the rewards of attempting haiku are substantial for many genres of writing, including other forms of poetry, descriptive writing in fiction and nonfiction, and

screenwriting, which shares much in common with poetry in terms of economy. The brevity of haiku assists the introduction of editing strategies that are of benefit in other contexts.

The workshop is in four stages: a discussion of haiku exemplars; a haiku walk; an editing session conducted on a large white board; and offering participants a "haiku checklist" to take away with them and continue working with. Whilst describing the workshop in detail, this essay differs from the teaching process by offering a summary of the history and form of haiku from the outset, whereas, in the workshop, I allow the background to emerge from discussion and questions. The workshop focuses first and foremost on the qualities of haiku, rather than its metrics and theories for reasons of maximum engagement in the shortest time, i.e., the charm of the form is more crucial than the technical debates that have arisen around its history.

Haiku history and sensibilities

Haiku has its origins in other, longer forms. The *Manyöshū: Collection of myriad leaves* (9th century), the first anthology of Japanese poetry, included a number of "envoys", which were short summaries of longer poems. The envoy gained popularity and became known as *waka*, or "short song", written in 5/7/5/7/7 *onji*. These poems later became known as *tanka*, and are still written today. They comprise an observation of nature, followed by a personal or philosophical reflection on that moment. Here is an example from the 10th century:

> In the mountain village
> The snow falls ceaselessly.
> The paths are obliterated.
> He would be truly devoted
> Who visited me today.
>
> Taira No Kanemori (1976, p. 31)

In the Middle Ages, the practise of linked writing – *renga* – developed as a literary parlour game. Together, writers would compose a waka, one link at a time, shifting across those two sections to begin, with the third link, another waka. The first link in the whole sequence became known as the *hokku*. Some writers began to compose hokku for their own sake. Matsuo Bashō – widely regarded as the first great master of what later became known as haiku – was especially adept at renga and hokku. The hokku was renamed haiku in the 20th century by Shiki (Ueda, 1976, pp. 7–8).

Many of the early *haijin*, like Bashō, were lay monks. The characteristics of the Zen aesthetic have been described as simplicity, directness, naturalness and profundity (Stryk, 1991, p. xviii). Yet, Jim Kacian cautions us to understand that Zen may be one of several modalities with much in common with haiku practice and that the haiku moment and the Zen moment of

insight – *satori* – need not be synonymous for us to enjoy haiku (Kacian, 2006). Undoubtedly, what these kinds of moments share is an attention to the details of experience, in what Mason has described as "an instant of keen perception" (Mason, 2017, p. 47).

As can be seen from the examples below, haiku and *senryu* are almost always in the present tense, since they are about what is happening now. Occasional exceptions can be found, but many critics would consider a haiku in the past tense to be something else. Having said that, haiku may engage with a period beyond the single event, which is why teachers such as Jane Reichhold have cautioned us against fetishising the moment (Reichhold, 2000), and reminded us that the moment can be understood in contradictory ways, philosophically (Reichhold, 2013, p. 36). Similarly, Haruo Shirane suggests that the insistence on haiku being written in response to experience rather than imagination, in so-called "desku", may be unnecessarily limiting (Shirane, 2016). Nevertheless, the anchors to experience are clear.

Haiku can, and do, make use of the senses, and like any good descriptive writing, this works best when it does so vividly, or by implication. Though most haiku relate to visual imagery, it is a great challenge to try to evoke the other senses, particularly a sense such as smell, which is often neglected and yet can be so resonant (especially of memory).

Haiku rarely use overt simile or metaphor, except where the metaphor is secondary to a literal event. It has even been claimed that there may be no place for simile in haiku at all (Gurga, 2003, p. 84). More subtle distinctions are possible with metaphor than with simile, such as the way in which a season word can act metaphorically (Shirane, 2016). The juxtaposition of two contrasting images of which many haiku are composed creates a comparison which is similar or equal to a metaphor. In the same way that metaphor invites the reader to consider something in a new light by its being compared with something else, Mason writes that "the two-part structure of the haiku makes it the perfect platform for the building and quick collapse of expectations" (Mason, 2017, p. 172). This aspect of haiku creates both surprise and engagement. It facilitates the formation of analogies from nature to human experience.

Predominantly, though, haiku describe things as they are, without direct comparison with other things. They tend to avoid anthropomorphism: giving objects human qualities. This tendency was certainly offered to me as a recommendation in the early stages of my haiku practice. Writing in response to my request for feedback on a submission to his journal *Presence*, which included a haiku about factories waiting for workers in the early morning, editor Martin Lucas said simply "factories don't wait". That was sound and direct advice, which disillusioned my misconception around the levels of human-oriented comparison possible in haiku.

Structure

Thankfully, it is now widely understood that writing haiku is not about counting syllables. Syllables are an approximation to Japanese onji (sound units), but not the same (see Lucas, 2002, p. 16; Lucas, 2007, pp. 5–6; Bullock, 2008; Reichhold, 2013, pp. 27–29; Gurga, 2003, pp. 15–16). In Japanese, the arrangement of onji is the main way of distinguishing between poetry and prose (Bates, 2005, pp. iii–iv). Onji include pauses for rests and grammatical markers, with words broken into far more sound units that are English words by syllables. Research has suggested that a more viable equivalent to composition in 17 onji is about 10–14 syllables (Welch, 2016). William Higginson recommends up to 12 syllables for haiku in English, recognising that even freer forms were made possible by experiments outside the 17 onji range by Japanese poets from the early 20th century onwards (Higginson, 1985, pp. 100–111). Bruce Ross advises using 12–14 syllables (Ross, 1993, p. xiii); Lee Gurga argues that a haiku in English should be 9–12 syllables (Gurga, 2003, p. 16). A scan through our examples reveals that most are in the 10–14 syllable range.

Haiku are frequently composed in two sections, from two contrasting images. A cut – *kiregi* – after the first image creates a pause for reflection. The two sections often comprise a fragment and a phrase. This is clear in most of the examples discussed below. The images are intuitively compared as well as contrasted.

Reichhold identifies comparison and contrast as two specific techniques of haiku composition (Reichhold, 2013, pp. 55–56), as does Terry Ann Carter (Carter, 2011, pp.12–13). Gurga discusses these two features together as ‘juxtaposition’ (Gurga, 2003, pp. 39–42). Charles Trumbull uses the same collective term, and reminds us that they create a particular version of parataxis (Trumbull, 2013, p. 195). These ways of describing elements of haiku technique also overlap what is said below about accord and association.

Importantly, the idea of two contrasting images (alongside the phrase and fragment) can be useful to participants as a starting point for composition. After observing an image in nature, one can look for a second image in the same or nearby spot, and it is highly likely that a relationship can be made between the two and become the basis for a poem. Considering that idea that haiku are about what is happening now, one realises that there is always something happening in nature and therefore, potentially, always a haiku at large – this is an encouraging thought for the would-be composer.

The relative dominance of the three-line form of haiku reflects the influence of the first translations into English which established the convention, partly from the convenience of breaking haiku into three lines of 5/7/5 syllables. They also sought to reflect the Jo Ha Kyu dynamic of beginning middle and end which is derived from Japanese courtly music and used especially in Noh theatre. Haiku in Japanese are written in one vertical line, so that there are compelling reasons to write a haiku in English in a single horizontal line (Kacian, 2010a). Two-line haiku are common and suit the concept of two contrasting images. Four-line haiku

are possible, especially where the phrasing better suits this arrangement. Concrete (shaped) haiku are another option.

The workshop discussion

My teaching practice allows a participant's encounter with a form of poetry to enfold as an experience, with the minimum of theorising and just enough context given to the examples to help the participant engage. This is assisted by a warm-hearted openness to participants' reactions and interpretations during discussions, and by walking as a group which assists in building social cohesion. The editing phase reiterates and exemplifies the guidelines offered in the context of the new writing produced by participants in the workshop and fosters analysis and detachment from one's own work, as well as developing choices.

This teaching technique is also adaptive and takes into account the reactions of participants in each workshop. This means that the timing of the sessions is variable. The discussion phase can take anywhere between half an hour and an hour and a quarter. The optimal amount of time for the walk is three-quarters of an hour to an hour. The editing phase takes at least an hour. It is feasible for the workshop to take place in a 2-hour session (discussion and walk), followed by a 1 hour session (whiteboard), after a break, or on a different day.

To begin the workshop, I lead the discussion phase to focus on qualities of haiku that are significant and appealing. As well as facilitating the participants' individual responses, I point out guidelines for writing haiku, as specific techniques emerge from the examples. In writing about the workshop method in this article, I include the full range of topics that have emerged, when, in practice, I have found that it is not necessary to cover all of these topics in full to get participants writing with enthusiasm.

First of all, I read several of the prepared examples aloud, without giving participants copies of the texts. It is important, as John Cage says, to develop our powers of audition (in Cage & Tudor, 2005), especially as poetry is an art so grounded in the spoken word. I then hand out copies of the examples to the group and ask for responses to any that moved them. Participants are encouraged to interpret the haiku as freely as they wish. We discuss their differing reactions, asserting that many interpretations are valid. Amongst the first haiku introduced are works from two of the recognised masters of the form, Bashō and Buson (for fuller portraits of four masters, which add Issa and Shiki, see Higginson, 1985, pp. 7–24; Kacian, 2007; Bullock, 2013, p. 45); we move quickly onto contemporary examples, all published in the last 30 years. In the analysis of haiku exemplars in the following section, use of the word "we" reflects the common experience of the participants and myself, gathering the collective wisdom of interpretations that have grown with each succeeding group.

A season

Our connection with nature, which haiku engages so richly, is symbolised by addressing the seasons. Very often haiku include a seasonal reference – a *kigo*. They may also suggest a larger passage of time:

> Summer grasses,
> all that remains
> of soldiers' dreams.
> Matsuo Bashō (1986, p. 80)

As well as being a kigo, the word "summer" acts as an adjective, modifying "grasses"; it is one of few adjectives we encounter. Whilst the use of a seasonal word was traditional in Japan, it is not essential in English. It is worth bearing in mind that one's sensitivity to seasons may be geographically dependent. The seasons are distinctly marked in Japan. I grew up in the UK, where the seasons were radically different in character. After emigrating to Aotearoa New Zealand, my subjective perception was that there were no seasons there; it was always warm! Learning to write haiku at this point, it was many years before I used season words in my haiku. A cut occurs here after the first line, which is a fragment, the phrase beginning on the second line and broken by enjambment, which emphasises the word "remains".

Importantly, the season can be implied, rather than overtly stated. In the following, contemporary example, the migration of godwits signals the end of summer in New Zealand:

> the godwits leave –
> she puts a blanket
> on the bed
> André Surridge (2005, p. 12)

A sense of accord resonates here between the actions of the birds and the human, an element of haiku composition I have elsewhere described as "continuity" (Bullock, 2011). It is possible to frame this resonance in a number of different but related ways: Reichhold calls it the technique of association (Reichhold, 2013, p. 56), whilst Kacian terms it the technique of juxtaposition (Kacian, 2006).

A moment

Haiku often reflect the revelation of a single moment, without intellectual comment; they observe but do not explain the event or experience:

> Evening wind –
> water laps

the heron's legs
Yosa Buson (2016)

This haiku places one in the scene. There is little of the poet or the human world in the haiku, just the breeze, the water, the heron's legs, in a distilled combination where we hear the water lapping at it all. Clearly a more reflective element inhabits Bashō's line "all that's left", showing that, even at an early stage, haiku were being pulled in different directions. Awareness of the moment means a grounding in actual experience, and it is interesting to note that a common exercise in mindfulness training when experiencing anxiety is to take deep breaths and then describe five things that are going on. Several participants have recounted the use of this practice and noted the similarity with the observations of haiku.

Unexpected

Haiku often present us with unexpected experiences and extremely specific and fleeting moments in time:

At the top
of the ferris wheel,
lilac scent.
Alexis Rotella (1993, p. 204)

The simplest moment

We go back to the simplest moments and encounter the sense of accord that is so often prominent in the best works. Here, the flagpole and the windless evening suggest, by association, long straight hair:

windless evening
she stands by the flagpole
brushing her hair
Steve Dolphy (2001, p. 10)

It is essential that the evening is windless, otherwise she would not be there brushing her hair; the adjective is not willy-nilly. A sense of ease pervades the scene – perhaps it is not always like this.

Delicate

Haiku are extremely subtle poems, open to a range of interpretations:

dragonfly …

the tai chi master
shifts his stance
Peggy Lyles (2000)

It could be that the tai chi master resembles a dragonfly, or that a particular movement he demonstrates does so. Or, the master makes a subtle alteration in his action to avoid a real dragonfly. The poem does not delineate the event but instead leaves it open and intrigues the reader. What I am calling delicacy is known as lightness – *karumi* – a haiku quality that Bashō is said to have established.

Seeing in a new way

Haiku help readers or listeners to see in new ways, and from differing perspectives, sometimes ones which are very close to that of an object itself, if that were possible:

summer afternoon
a beach umbrella
no one comes to
Geraldine Little (1993, p. 125)

This is about what is going on, with little recourse to human opinion, despite the emotive "no one comes to." The way of seeing is present, but the human, fittingly, is less so.

Recycle clichés

Seeing in a fresh way and the questioning attitudes of haiku can include what I like to call the technique of recycling clichés:

free wifi …
each to their
own device
Sam Bateman (2017)

We all use clichés, especially in the first drafts of poems. The challenge, when we notice what we have written, is to try to find our own way of saying the same thing. Simon Armitage has suggested that using a cliché is like letting someone else speak for you (in a keynote speech titled "Putting poetry in its place" at the Poetry on the Move festival in Canberra, 15 September 2016). We feel challenged when clichés are pointed out in our work, but we should have confidence that we can find a fresher way of expressing ourselves when challenged to do so. One strategy is to disrupt the cliché and recycle it. Since a cliché is usually composed of a few words in a phrase, it is sometimes enough to change just one of those words. The strategy is achieved here with remarkable economy, as the poet alters but

one letter in the cliché phrase “each to their own devices” to great effect, managing to comment on a contemporary phenomenon which can seem to isolate as much as it connects.

Suggest something much bigger

Haiku sometimes suggest dimensions beyond what is observed, by a shift or expansion of associations:

> out of the mud
> ten thousand
> flamingos
> Sandra Simpson (2006, p. 7)

This haiku functions perfectly well in describing the literal reality that flamingos suddenly appear out of a swampy area and in huge numbers. It also plays with time. The mind might leap to thoughts of evolution and the way species have developed “out of the mud”, as it were, speaking to a whole process and a massive expanse of time. In that case, we not only get a glimpse of an individual beauty magicked from the mud, but a snapshot of a sequence in history. This reading is supported by the phrase “ten thousand” which for some readers will evoke “the ten thousand things”, a Chinese euphemism for the multiplicity of things. In Daoism, “Tao produces One. One produces Two. Two produces Three. Three produces All Creatures” (Land, 1990, p. 42). This is the fourth power of ten: ten thousand. In this sense, the poem is both specific and general, in the now and in the past, with diverse analogies operating.

A story

Haiku can present us with a story, since the narrative element is rarely missing, even from the shortest, most condensed poems. This piece suggests a huge narrative; I think of it as a novel in a poem:

> honeymoon
> we wade into the current
> of a great river
> Kirsty Karkow (2002)

Interestingly, the river is literal, or probably literal, but metaphorical at the same time, i.e., the couple could be on honeymoon, camping by a massive river, but the river is also a metaphor for the experience of marriage, new to them and unfolding.

Detail

Haiku record detail of the most specific kind:

> the baby's pee
> pulls roadside dust
> into rolling beads
> Ruth Yarrow (1999, p. 312)

This piece is particularly refreshing for the way it encounters a subject that many poets might avoid; the message is that no topic is off limits, that such details are as much part of life as a ray of sun or a leaf floating on water.

Indirection

Haiku mobilise indirection for some magical effects, never naming an object or situation if they can better describe it in a roundabout way and with greater subtlety:

> beneath the moon
> the heron's slow step
> towards frog-sound
> Michael Dylan Welch (2009, p. 10)

Here, the text does not cite "frog" but "frog-sound". We are drawn into the poem as the heron is to frog sound, rather than to the idea of a frog, which would have removed much charm from the piece and failed to show what attracted the predator. The well-chosen little adjective, "slow", assists the sibilance produced by "heron's" and "step", so that the poem offers something of a *shhhh*, which evokes the scene further.

Here, indirection gives us the unexpected and rather surreal image of a whole garden coming into the house:

> wet garden
> a puppy
> brings it in
> Ernest Berry (2008, p. 43)

This haiku never fails to raise a smile, and one realises that indirection, in this case, is closely linked to comic misdirection.

Zen-like

Haiku are Zen-like, with a depth founded on the repetition of looking and looking again, intently, or listening and listening again, to distinctly differing sounds:

the sound
of rain on the sound
of waves
Elizabeth Searle Lamb (2013, p. 67)

The Zen element reflects haiku's early association with Buddhism and meditation practices. In some contexts, use of the word "sound" might be too bland. On this occasion, it speeds up the storytelling element of the poem, so that the reader is directed sooner to the fact that there are two layers of sound to be heard. It feels as though the senses are merging, that something can be placed on a sound, as if it is a tangible surface. This changes our reality somewhat, but still grounds the reader in a focus on what is happening, and encourages us to contemplate it deeply.

Parallels

As suggested above, in relation to the idea of accord, haiku create and maintain parallels between different aspects of their subject matter, for example, between a cabinetmaker's craft and the building of his coffin:

cabinetmaker
the mortice joints
on his coffin
John Bird (2008)

Participants sometimes debate who made the coffin, since the significance of that idea shifts one's attention and interest. Maybe the cabinetmaker made it himself – a final act of dedication to craft and an acknowledgement of the self and of death. Or, it might have been made for him, by a colleague or colleagues who want to honour his practice in an appropriate way. Or even, at a stretch, that he has built this for someone else.

Links

Haiku help to shape links in understanding, which connect us to other communities, exemplified by this haiku:

refugees
trying to get through
the TV screen
Leo Lavery (2002, p. 33)

The first line is a fragment and is followed by a phrase, broken by enjambment at the end of the second line, which emphasises the refugees' need to get through, somehow. In this case, it has more do with getting through to us, the public, who might be able to bring about a change in their status. The actual border they are trying to cross is omitted from the poem, as if the author is trying to tell us that the issue of public opinion, which is influenced by the media, is central.

Ask a question

Haiku may pose questions. Bashō saw no reason not to do this, and he frequently addresses inanimate objects in his work. Here, a more general contemplation of cicada song leads to a kind of *koan*, a question that can never be answered:

Cicada – did it
chirp till it
knew nothing else?
Matsuo Bashō (1986, p. 49)

One line

As already suggested, haiku in one horizontal line is a significant and increasingly common form in English.

gunshot the length of the lake
Jim Kacian (2013, p. 153)

As well as varying the associations between words, the compression or running together of the single line gives the poem what Kacian himself has dubbed "speed rush" (Kacian, 2010b). The onomatopoeic gunshot leaps across the lake – the alliteration of "length" and "lake" speeds it on. The compression confirms that this sound can be heard anywhere on the lake, suggesting many moments in different locations.

From the human point of view (senryu)

Haiku about human nature are termed *senryu*. This is sometimes a difficult distinction to make. Senryu are not only about human experience but reflect a particular person's point of view or an aspect of their experience or inner world:

hospice visit he still beats me at chess
Joanna Preston (2001, p. 57)

This one-line senryu brings up another choice related to form. Caesura within lines are as much an option in haiku as in contemporary poetry. The strategy can be blended with the single-line aesthetic to add to the range of effects and length of pauses which contribute to meaning. The pause here means that the poem does not generate "speed rush" to quite the same extent as in the previous example. But the two phrases being on the same line does emphasise this senryu's sense of continuity and helps show the strength of mind that the man still has, despite his impending death.

This next, three-line senryu exhibits strongly the subjective human experience:

in a room
with walls of eggshell blue –
we disagree
Alison Williams (2011, p. 11)

Why is eggshell blue important? Why that choice of colour? The word "eggshell" has other connotations, such as "walking on eggshells", which captures the mood of the poem. Without it, the word "blue" would still do a lot of work, but in a more conventional way, since blue is commonplace as a symbol of mood. The adjective "eggshell" complicates the scene in a special way, making it more delicate and less certain.

The following piece conveys a subjective yet familiar experience through "the briefest touch":

city street –
the briefest touch
of a stranger's hand
Vanessa Proctor (2002, p. 18)

The adjective "briefest" emphasises just how fleeting the moment is – it is barely a moment at all. This moment is too detached, it longs for more, to connect with other people, even in the city, where busy-ness is implicit.

Visual haiku

I sometimes share a visually oriented example to demonstrate the fact that haiku poets, like poets generally, can play with page space in ways that contribute to meaning:

l(a
le
af
fa

ll
s)

one
li
ness
e. e. cummings (2013, p. 9)

This poem makes use of the association between loneliness and oneness – here represented as "oneliness". In common with other semiotically oriented poems, this piece uses space to enact the content of the poem through the adoption of a less conventional line.

Participants often comment on the detachment of haiku, which is associated with *karumi* (see Stryk, 1986, p. 10), and the acceptance of things as they are, reflected in the fact that the texts refrain from commenting on what they describe. The minimalist aspect of haiku is self-evident – participants are usually amazed that so much can be communicated through so few words. It is clear that saying as much as possible with the fewest words is important. To this end, and as the issue of syllables is unpacked, I share a haiku which is written in more than 17 syllables, to demonstrate, in yet another way, why and how syllables are not the main issue.

Eric Mould's winning haiku in the New Zealand Poetry Society's International Haiku Competition a few years ago sported 21 syllables, necessitated by the use of a cumbersome compound noun which acts as title for the dignatory depicted:

Waitangi Day squall –
the Governor-General's representative
grips his neck-tie
Eric Mould (2002, p. 38)

The long title is part of the poem's essential bombastic air. Had the context been a different one, evoking another occupation, such as a chef, then the haiku would comprise only 11 syllables, which helps show that syllable count is arbitrary.

By this point, the group is very engaged and excited about what haiku can achieve. The discussion of the syllable count leads nicely into a brief history of the form. On many occasions participants have expressed relief in discovering that writing haiku is not about counting syllables. Then we walk.

A walk

Traditionally, in Japan, one goes on a haiku walk – *gingko* – to gather material for haiku. When we do this, we could be said to be sketching from nature – *shasei*, which Lucien Stryk terms "on-the-spot composition" (Stryk, 1986, p. 14) – but fashioning complete haiku is not impossible, even for beginners. The walk gives participants an experience of nature, which intrinsically connects us to a season. I remind participants that, if in doubt, the haiku can be built from two contrasting images from the nearby scenes in the park or lakeside, and encourage them to record their observations as specifically as possible.

The group walk assists a sense of community. Mostly we are silent whilst walking, gathering and composing, but if anyone has questions or needs to chat, we accommodate that, too.

A whiteboard

Returning to the classroom, I ask participants to write at least one potential haiku each on the whiteboard. I ask the group if editing suggestions are welcome, and they invariably agree. By this time, we have usually spent a week together on intensive work, but even when I have used this format with other groups where we have shared only this workshop time, the camaraderie created by discussion and by the shared walk tends to make participants feel secure and open to critiquing the works.

Even first attempts at haiku frequently contain strong imagery, which is to be greatly celebrated. But what is happening in the poem is sometimes clouded by intellectual comment or weakened by abstraction. Overuse of abstraction is probably the commonest fault and is one that early efforts at haiku share with other forms of poetry. Participants use words like "tranquillity" to try to capture a feeling they had, whilst succeeding only in commenting on the experience in a generalised way. When I ask what gave rise to a particular reflection, they invariably reply with a strong image. I suggest that this image goes into the poem, and, having established a greater degree of specificity to work from, more vibrant material is easily generated.

I have a theory that our minds get ahead of our observations and record quick summaries of what we are seeing, usually in the form of abstractions, instead of the sensory detail that attracted us to an event in the first place, and which is what will also attract the reader. This is a tendency that I think all poets and teachers need to be aware of, and to actively promote the use of detail to offset it.

As we are editing, we look at different word combinations, brainstorming options for lines – since discussion of phrasing naturally leads to reconsidering structure – and writing possible versions on the board. This gives the author of the haiku a sense of choice about which version to accept. The feedback attained from peers is useful; the writer is gaining the opinions of several readers. I have found that any intelligent reader can tell the writer

something significant about the reception of a work – they do not have to be an expert in that genre. So, again, we use a little collective wisdom, which encourages everyone to contribute, and fosters insightful reading.

Participants often suggest excellent edits in this context. In one workshop, I was pointing out the fact that it is possible to incorporate errors into our work. I shared this haiku that I had written on our walk:

autumn
his steps echo
his steps echo

I also wrote up an alternate version which I had copied down wrongly from one notebook to another:

autumn
his steps echo
his echo steps

Though novel, I did not settle on this choice, but offered the example to show that flexibility in editing can be useful for entertaining possible alternatives. The original repetition of "his steps echo" has the advantage of conveying a repeated action in a very simple manner. But a participant then offered this further edit which suggested that repetition was not necessary in this case, a version which most members of the group preferred:

autumn
his steps echo

I later changed it to

autumn
his steps
echo

to give the steps more echoing space. I incorporated the haiku into a sequence, submitted to the journal *Communion*, whose editor, Jane Williams, suggested that the variety of personal pronouns in the sequence was somewhat confusing. I then remembered that this haiku was about my own steps and restored the first-person pronoun, and so the piece finds its final form:

autumn
his steps

echo
Bullock (2021)

The various choices open to me were very much a result of these shared editing processes. Allowing one's work, as teacher, to be critiqued alongside everyone else's enhances the sense of agency for participants.

Checklist of haiku qualities and guidelines

I have created a checklist for the participant to take away for future reference. These do not include every aspect of haiku composition covered in either the workshop or in this essay. Rather, the list includes what I have discovered to be the minimum of information for writing haiku, and it is intended as a set of reminders or prompts. It may not be possible to teach from this list without being an experienced haiku poet and/or teacher, but I hope it will serve to assist those who are already practicing the art of haiku and the art of teaching it.

Haiku checklist:

Haiku may refer directly to a season or allude to one (with a seasonal word: kigo), or pertain to no particular season.

Haiku often capture a moment in time.

Haiku observe, they don't explain.

Haiku are in the present tense.

Less is more: say as much as possible with the fewest words.

Haiku are often composed of two contrasting images. A cut (kiregi) after the first image creates a pause for reflection. The two sections may form a fragment and a phrase.

Haiku can use any of the senses.

Haiku describe things as they are, without comparison with other things (avoid anthropomorphism: giving objects human qualities).

Haiku rarely use simile and metaphor (except where the metaphor is secondary to a literal event).

Adjectives and adverbs are used sparingly.

Haiku do not usually rhyme.

Haiku often create analogies from nature to human experience.

Haiku about human nature are called senryu, but it can be a fine line between haiku and senryu, since, debatably, humans are animals in the landscape.

Haiku are commonly written over three lines, but one, two and four-line haiku and concrete (shaped) haiku are also options.

Additional elements and reflections on haiku composition

If time and interest allow, I introduce a few more guidelines or reiterate certain aspects of haiku that have already been encountered in the workshop; some of these arise naturally in the discussion phase. I include them here for the sake of fullness in the discussion of haiku dynamics, particularly for the would-be workshop leader. These include less essential elements of haiku composition, even if they may be considered, in the case of *wabi* and *sabi*, to be important Japanese sensibilities.

Wabi

The concept of *wabi* in Japanese literature speaks to the sense of the poverty of objects and experiences, a kind of emptiness in things that is noted but not decried. This is found in many of the pieces, beginning with Bashō's deserted battle site, and at Little's beach umbrella that no one comes to; the aching simplicity of Dolphy's woman brushing her hair at the flagpole, or Yarrow's noting of the baby's pee in roadside dust.

Sabi

The concept of *sabi* concerns an implicit sadness or isolation in the state of things in nature, perhaps the sense in which things are isolated. This comes across in Bashō's "Summer grasses" and in Proctor's "city street".

Adjectives and adverbs

Adjectives and adverbs are used sparingly. I have noted adjectives in the poems by Bashō, Dolphy, Welch, Williams and Proctor, but there are few others in the set (I count only four – in Rotella, Karkow, Berry and Bird). We sometimes discuss these few choice examples, debate how essential or otherwise they are and what they contribute.

Lack of verbs

Participants sometimes notice that a number of haiku contain no verbs. Poems by Bashō, Rotella, Simpson, Lamb, Bird, Bateman and Kacian all lack them. They are implied in their noun function in Welch and Proctor, though, according to Ferris Gilli, this still means that they effectively have no verb (Gilli, 2018). Such a state does not mean that nothing is happening in the poems, but rather that, in the moment depicted, receiving is more important than active agency, a witnessing that does not need the action to be foregrounded, since the effects of actions already in motion communicate more than enough.

Rhyme

Haiku do not usually rhyme. The sonic possibilities of the Japanese language do not allow this practice; a fine explanation of which can be found in Evan Bates' succinct introduction to his selection of translations from the *Manyöshū* (Bates, 2005, pp. iii-iv).

Conclusion

On the ARRTS program we usually take part in a two-day letterpress workshop at the ANU Printmedia Book Studio under the guidance of Visual Arts mentor, letterpress artist and book designer Dr. Caren Florance; publications from the workshop are archived in the National Library of Australia. The program also produces a catalogue to accompany the showcase evening. These artefacts allow me to reproduce a selection of works by participants:

> Out of the darkness
> The sleepy bear
> Yawns
>
> Phil Courtney (ADF ARRTS Program: Showcase 16.2, 2016, p. 48)

> Little coot
> The lake consumes it
> Then it reappears
>
> Craig Fullarton (*Sana*: *UC Defence ARRTS 2018.2*, 2018, p. 4)

> Remembrance Day crowd
> Soft wind blows
> Birds rustling
>
> B. Hoffman (*Sana*: *UC Defence ARRTS 2018.2*, 2018, p. 6)

> Wet cement
> The graffiti Locked in

B. Hoffman (ADF ARRTS Program: Showcase 18.2, 2018, p. 55)

Midnight swan
Floats bouquet
Of feathers
Craig Krause (Midnight swan: UC Defence ARRTS 2019.1, 2019, p. 3)

a bead of water
drops
and breaks
David Wilkinson (ADF ARRTS Program: Showcase 20.1 2020, p. 29)

The examples exhibit a keen engagement with the environment and with what is happening now, through use of sensory detail. Two images are often compared or contrasted, for example, the cement and the graffiti, the swan, and (more specifically) the feathers. Analogies can be formed from most, if not all, of the examples. The images surprise us; for example, the bear's yawn and the reappearing coots. The use of line breaks is also sophisticated, with the delay after "floats bouquet" creating an intriguing middle line through its use of enjambment. The distinction made about the drop of water that drops and breaks shows attention to the finest details of experience, details that makes one pause to realise how large such moments can be. The examples from participants exemplify this article's argument that discussion and engagement with the environment and communicating the core of techniques for haiku practice can produce successful and satisfying results in a relatively short span of time. I offer these haiku as part of the conclusion for this essay, with thanks to participants for their poetry and thoughts.

Notes

[1] Haiku have been written in a military context in the past. Sandra Simpson describes French, Italian and English soldier-poets who wrote haiku in the trenches, see Snapshots: Haiku in the Great War. *Juxta, 2*(1). https://thehaikufoundation.org/juxta/juxta-2-1/snapshots-haiku-in-the-great-war/

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