

Go Tell It on the Mountain - The Personal in Haiku by Roberta Beary

In September 1990 I became a 'trailing spouse' and followed my then-husband to his new job in Tokyo. Living and working in Japan in the 1990s, I experienced, for the first time, life as an outsider, an outsider who was 'invited' to learn about Japanese culture.

One invitation included joining a haiku group that accepted 'gagin'. The group met in a drab government building in Tokyo's Minato-ku ward. In my weekly sessions, I learned that haiku must be impersonal and must include a season element. I was also strongly advised to write in the 5-7-5 three-line haiku form. For a long time I tried to write haiku that followed those three requirements and I was not successful. I remember one of the first haiku I wrote in Japan used an image of a cement truck.

Past the cement trucks
row upon row of roses
quietly dancing. (1)

In my Japanese haiku group, I gradually learned not to use 'initial caps' or punctuation. The 5-7-5 form continued to be encouraged.

on a bed of leaves
cicada with broken wing -
children running by (2)

After a few years of living in Japan I decided to go out on a limb and write something personal, while still adhering to the traditional form:

picking strawberries
grandma's rolled up sleeves reveal
pale tattooed numbers (3)

This image is based on my friend M's mother, a Holocaust survivor. After school at the playground, I would often see M's mother with her sleeves rolled up, welcoming her son with a hug. I noticed pale numbers with a faint blue tinge on her inner forearm. Just before leaving Japan I entered 'picking strawberries' in a haiku contest. When I returned to the States, I was stunned to learn that my haiku had received a Commended award.

Back in the US in 1996, I was anxious to meet other haiku poets. I joined a local haiku group, towpath poets, which had got together for the first time just a year earlier. There I learned that not everyone writes in a 5-7-5 three-line form of haiku and that season elements are not an absolute.

In December 1997 towpath poets hosted the annual Haiku Society of America (HSA) meeting in Washington DC. At one of the sessions, led by Ken Leibman, then the HSA journal's Frogpond editor, members of the audience were asked to submit an anonymous haiku for discussion. I gamely put my haiku hat in the ring with this entry which I wrote on the spot:

piano practice
in the room above me
my father shouting (4)

I had no idea Ken Leibman would choose my haiku to illustrate the question, 'Is this haiku?' Some members of the audience voiced their opinion that this was not haiku as the author was 'too present' in the poem. Others said it was a perfectly good haiku and proceeded to explain it in such a way that I wondered if they were talking about my haiku or someone else's work. I don't recall much else of the discussion except that Ken Leibman asked the poet to identify him/herself. No one had told me that the anonymous haiku session would not remain anonymous.

Ken asked me if this haiku had its roots in a memory from my childhood. As with most of my haiku, there is an element of the present tense which denotes a childhood memory. In my 'piano practice' haiku, the image of my father shouting in the upstairs bedroom as I practiced piano in the downstairs living room is obvious. Less obvious is the resonance of the present tense. Even today, when I play the piano in my own living room, I sometimes lift my head to listen for the sound of my father shouting. Perhaps this is one reason William Faulkner's quip 'The past isn't dead. It isn't even past' (5) remains a favourite of mine.

After the meeting, Ken and I and some other poets found a local watering hole and continued our discussion of the personal in haiku. Ken told me he liked my haiku because it was different and said something new. He suggested that I submit it for publication and encouraged me to write haiku that 'speaks to me' and not worry about the opinions of others. Since then, I've tried to follow his advice.

At the time, my life was in a period of transition. The husband I had followed to Japan had left me and my two young children almost as soon as we all returned to the States. I was picking up the pieces of my life and writing the process.

another snowstorm
a child braids her doll's hair
over and over (6)

No subject was taboo. While there was no actual custody battle in a courtroom, there were endless meetings with child psychologists chosen by my then-husband.

custody hearing
seeing his arms cross
i uncross mine (7)

Was I writing haiku? Plenty of people thought I wasn't. And they wrote to tell me about it. Sometimes I would try my hand at something different and use a kigo, a season word. But even then something personal would find its way into my haiku.

my son and i
counting fireflies
counting stars (8)

When I won the 1999 Penumbra Haiku Contest with this haiku, I was happy to read judge Elizabeth St Jacques' comment that my haiku 'expresses a strong sense of love and sharing between son and parent with a touch of humour'. From that point on there was no stopping me. I had been given the go-ahead and that was enough.

I wrote about my childhood longing for my mother's red hat juxtaposed to my adult inheritance of that same hat.

mother's red hat
short years of wanting it
long years of having it (9)

I continued to enter contests because I wanted to spread the word that it was okay to write haiku about one's own life. Each contest win brought wider acceptance.

halloween twilight
again this year my son waits
alone by the door (10)

The period of transition in my personal life was ending, I was getting remarried, my children were growing up, my parents needed my help more, and it was all grist for the mill. I kept writing. Eventually I had enough poems for a collection, *The Unworn Necklace*, which I entered in the Snapshot Press Haiku Contest. *The Unworn Necklace* won first place and was published in paperback in 2007 by Snapshot Press. Later the book went on to win a Kanterman Award from the Haiku Society of America and was a finalist for an award from the Poetry Society of America, a first for a haiku collection.

all day long
i feel its weight
the unworn necklace (11)

Footnotes:

- 1 Mainichi Daily News, June 22, 1991.
- 2 Mainichi Daily News, Haiku in English, No. 517.
- 3 picking strawberries: Commended, International Haiku Contest (1994) in Commemoration of the 300th Anniversary of Matsuo Basho Contest, Haiku International Special Issue, Haiku International Association (1996).
- 4 Woodnotes 31.
- 5 Requiem for a Nun by William Faulkner.
- 6 Woodnotes 29.
- 7 Pocket Change (towpath poets anthology, Red Moon Press 2000).
- 8 First Prize, Penumbra Haiku Contest, 1999.
- 9 *The Unworn Necklace* (Snapshot Press, 1st hardcover ed. 2011).
- 10 First Prize, Tokutomi Memorial Haiku Contest.
- 11 *The Unworn Necklace*.

Editor's note: Roberta Beary is an award-winning American poet who lives near Washington DC. She has written this article especially for Haiku NewZ. To read more of Roberta's haiku please visit her website.