

How to Now: Listening to Haiku Poets

-by Tracy Koretsky

Hey - keep on the right side
of that yellow line

Who hasn't been there? In that car? When a voice, shouted from the passenger seat, startles us, and saves our lives. These are lines translating the experience of the attention being redirected - immediately and with force. They come from *Brighter Yellow*, a poem collected in *Danger on Peaks*, and are quintessential Gary Snyder.

If you know anything of Mr. Snyder's work, you know of its indebtedness to the various traditional forms of Japanese poetry. Though Snyder has loosened the strictures under which many haiku poets practice and adapted them to his own far more free style, the essence of Japanese poetry - its values and precepts - underpin his work. It is a choice that distinguishes him, that sets him apart from most Western poets with their emphasis on memory and interpretation of experience.

Rather haiku - which according to co-founder of the World Haiku Association, Jim Kacian, "is now the most practiced form of literature in the world" - is an attempt to capture the essence of "now." It is the very core of haiku, perhaps even its *raison d'être*. But what does it mean? Does it refer to the dictionary definition of "at this present moment" and, if so, what does "this present moment" mean? Or rather, does "now" refer to something more elusive - a state of consciousness, if you will. Well, not surprisingly, where there are poets, there are layers of interpretation.

Many aim towards a literal interpretation: "now" means to be "in the moment." They practice what is called *shasei*, or "sketching from life." The idea comes to us through Masaoka Shiki, considered to be the originator of the equivalent of modernism in haiku. Here is a *shasei* haiku from Joan Payne Kincaid who, by the way, is also well-known for her political poetry, (another, very different, interpretation of the word "now.")

snowflakes
by the lake
feathers from the hawk's meal

Joan has this to say about her haiku:

This is in the moment because these things were there when I was. To be in the moment one must die to everything in the past and filter it out entirely thus leaving one to be totally at one with the moment at hand and the subject or subjects relating to it.

The pivot, or second line, connects that which otherwise would not be connected. It is a wonderful surprise.

The writer must be totally one with the subjects ... the writer becomes the subject and lets go the ego, memory, past relationships, everything but, in this case, the snowflakes, lake, and feathers.

It is being in the now, not the past nor future. It is a poetic snapshot or postcard. The lake is there and the snowflakes, but the feathers - being the only evidence of a prior and riveting event - is a total surprise. One that led the ancient haikuist to exclaim "AHA."

Notice that Joan has not merely reported the conditions of her walk. This is not a weather report. This is an account of the moment of a realization; the moment the poet has come to understand a dramatic natural event that occurred before her arrival. She then uses the seasonal language of haiku to signify the event. In other words, "snowflakes" connotes "winter" which connotes "death". That the white flakes and the feathers resemble one another relates them by unifying them, exemplifying another aspect of well-made Zen-influenced art.

A second way in which haiku poets affect "now" is by attending the ephemeral, the "here now, then gone". This one by Tasmanian poet, Ron Moss, captures a fraction of an instant:

autumn wake-
the widow's tremor
in her coffee¹

He writes:

In this haiku nothing can be more immediate than a small ripple that comes from movement. The brevity of the situation gives us the emotional element of human nature, which is often an important part of haiku.

Life, by its transitory and changing nature, can be a great teacher. The honesty of "now", or being in the moment is often spoken about in great spiritual traditions - to me, the path of haiku helps me focus, and be alive in the moment. Instead of a life of unconscious death. This humble form written well, can inspire us to see what is always there, in all its wonder.

It is interesting that Ron, who is also a visual artist, mentions the inspiration to see. In doing so he underscores the haiku poet's special sensitivity to observable detail. His poem was written by paying attention.

This next piece by Denis M. Garrison, editor of *Modern English Tanka*, uses the same strategy, except here the observable moment lasts somewhat longer illustrating that what is relevant is not the quantity of time depicted, but rather the awareness of its passing.

ploughed fields-
an irrigator sends up
drifting rainbows²

Denis explains:

At their best, haiku poets excel at capturing moments of epiphany. Such moments are firmly fixed in the "now", in

fleeting scenes and in flashes of insight. It is a deep realisation of the ephemerality of all life that makes for profound appreciation of every moment and gratitude for a glimpse of beauty that passes in an instant.

In "ploughed fields", a transitory moment of resplendent beauty in a long day of hard and dirty labor, is captured. The sun paints rainbows in the drifting mists from the farm machinery. This continually changing sight is more precious both for being so brief and for its contrast with the mundanity of the farm work.

More is happening here than a refreshing respite. Rather, there is a change in emotional state, a redirecting of consciousness.

This brings us to a third method frequently used by haiku poets to convey that elusive sense of "now": reflexively observing their consciousness, that is, their directed attentiveness. For many haiku poets, this is the true spirit of haiku.

Take, for example, this piece by Michael Dylan Welch, editor of *Tundra*:

meteor shower . . .
a gentle wave
wets our sandals

Anyone who has even the slightest familiarity with Michael knows him to be a natural and gifted teacher. This is how he explained his work:

In this poem the poet is absorbed with watching a meteor shower from the beach. The tide has begun to turn, signaled by a gentle wave that reaches the poet's foot. At that moment, the gravity of the cosmos becomes directly personal and tactile. The tide has reached its nadir, and as the water begins to rise again, the first gentle wave of change wets the poet's sandals. At that moment, his attention shifts from up to down as he becomes aware of the enormity of gravity, and how the cycles of planets, meteors, and moons affects him even in a very small way. At that moment the poet shares this realization not only with the universe but also his companion. And all of this, when the wave wets their sandaled feet, happens in the instant.

Here is a poem about parallel consciousness: exterior and the interior. Though both exist simultaneously, the poet can actively attend only one or the other. The haiku records the moment of crossing from one to the other. That yanking of attention from sky to water, but also from exterior attention to interior, that is jolt to the "now".

Kala Ramesh, a bright rising star in the haiku community, uses the exact opposite strategy - the interior attention being called to the exterior - to translate her experience as classical musician from Southern India:

deep in raaga
a sudden applause
startles the singer

In her own words:

In Indian classical music, raaga means melody with its root meaning in Sanskrit being "passion". There is a pun on the word "raaga" in the above poem.

Unlike Western classical music, which is scored, Indian classical is based on improvisation. Here a musician creates on the concert platform; jazz comes closest to this. When a musician improvises, there is a natural need to go deep within herself.

Listening to Indian classical, the audience can, at any time, spontaneously respond to the music being created with loud claps or appreciation. This is not regarded as a disturbance but more as an incentive to the artist to create better!

As expected, a musician, who is deep into the ragaa/melody, has lost touch with the outside world, and is startled by this sudden appreciation.

Finally, with this charmer, Michael Rehling, who serves his community by maintaining a variety of popular haiku related websites and forums, reminds us that "now" in a haiku sense has nothing at all to do with the time of day.

clock shop
noon proclaimed
over and over

Now is a moving target, and the fact that time has marked itself, over and over again in this otherwise quiet clock shop brings that point home. It proved a fascinating reminder that although the idea of a precise "time" is an invention of human kind, the passage of time is an essential part of the way the cosmos functions. Hearing noon proclaimed over and over was a not so subtle reminder of the existence of, and the impreciseness of time in our lives.

As we read and write this deceptively simple form we become like the clocks in Michael's poem, proclaiming again and again individually that, at this moment, we acknowledge that we are acute and aware. It is a mighty tool for any poet, helping one to sharpen the senses, to notice, and ultimately, to translate the unique and universal experiences of our lives.

Footnotes:

1. "autumn wake" first published online in *Haiku World's* Shiki Monthly Kukai.
2. "ploughed fields" first published in *Hidden River* (Modern English Tanka Press, 2006).