

Jesse Curran

The Space Between: On Climate Change & Haiku Perception

*The snow is melting
and the village is flooded
with children.¹*

I always turn to this particular Issa haiku during mid-March. It is especially poignant after a rough winter. My appreciation is further heightened because I live in a small seaside village that transforms joyfully every spring. I can hear the children in the park from where I write, and although the temperatures are still below average, there are more walkers on the sidewalks. Slowly, our bemoaned polar vortex winter seems to be finally letting go.

For me, the cold this winter felt familiar and nostalgic. It felt, well, like winter. Grateful for the old Bean duck boots, down comforter, wool socks, and hushed evenings, I was reminded of my undergraduate days in western New York. I found myself writing letters to old college friends, recalling and rhapsodizing about icy wind freezing the landscape, while we studied for midterms and created our own warmth with cocktails and conversation. I have a visceral memory of sitting in my Shakespeare classroom, watching the snow fall, while the old windows were propped open with rulers because the forced heat was working overtime. I can still see the steam rising in front of the snowflakes and remember being enraptured by the way poetry finds language for both intimacy and immensity. This winter, reminiscent of my undergraduate days, had me turning to Shakespeare: “Here feel we but the penalty of Adam, / The seasons' difference, as the icy fang / And churlish chiding of the winter's wind, / Which, when it bites and blows upon my body, / Even till I shrink with cold, I smile.”²

Fueled by nostalgia and shrinking with cold, I smiled quite a bit this winter, despite cancelled flights, delayed MLA interviews, and frozen pipes. Warm memories of cold days kept my vital heat alive, although these days, my students and I read less Shakespeare and more articles on climate change and the Anthropocene. As someone who has been quietly studying, and attempting to think about ecological being for my adult life, this year, the media's response seems especially heightened. Suddenly, everyone is talking. Climate change is buzzing in the halls of academe; it almost feels trendy. And so when, on one snowy February morning of this polar vortex winter, a bubbly colleague with an interest in ecological criticism popped her head in my office and said, “well, all this snow is a good sign for global warming,” I sat on her comment for the better part of an hour. My instinct was to judge her lack of perspective and her poor sense of scale. Does the fact that it was cold here suggest a reversal of global patterns? What world was she living in? However, my chapped lips and dried skin were saying something else, perhaps even, on some physiological level, agreeing with her. My colleague was experiencing her winter. I was experiencing mine. Who am I to say what the future will bring? Or what, exactly, will happen to winter?

Indeed, despite our cold here in New York, Europe's winter was far warmer this year, and globally, the temperatures continue to rise. And although it felt like a wintry winter here in

New York, in the rest of world the news tells us of bizarre weather patterns. I read of terrible draughts in California, extreme flooding in Great Britain, and of people wearing short sleeves for the winter Olympic games in Russia. And in January, I was in Costa Rica, and it felt, well, like summer. But who really knows what the rest of world is actually feeling? Weather is a strange phenomenon. How do we process the threshold between what we are told is happening and how we actually experience it? This is a tricky place, where I suspect “climate deniers” dig in, while others, who are perhaps not so reactionary, attempt to understand elongated scales and ecological enmeshment. Such scales continually remind us of our perceptual limitations and beg humility.

For these reasons, I am interested in this indeterminate space between what the scientists say is happening out there and the immediacy of experience. The space between the comparative empirical data on a “season,” measured against the feeling of winter in the bones, which some might call the difference between climate and weather. I am interested in how we experience and interpret extremity, and how we find language to talk about change. What global warming seems to heighten is our experience of change, and this, like change itself, falls into the territory of uncertainty. I am interested in our relationship to uncertainty.

Haiku poets tend to be at home in change; often, it is their subject and their passion. As Basho writes, “The basis of art is change in the universe...to stop a thing would be to halve a sight or sound in our heart.”³ Commonly informed by epistemologies that emphasize impermanence, haiku poets are perceptually barometric. Traditional haiku are usually grounded in a place and like most poetry, depend upon constructing imagery through sense perception. In traditional Japanese literature, the *kigo*, or season-word, was especially important in *renga*, or collaborative link-verse, from which haiku emerged. Cherry blossoms, pumpkins, chrysanthemums, wisteria, cicadas, eggplants, scarecrows, first-snows, fallen-leaves, harvest moons, morning-glories, and frogs, all signal particular moments in cyclical temporality. And more often than not, they are passing in and out existence; as Basho writes, “From all these trees / in the salads, in the soup, everywhere / cherry blossoms fall” and Buson, “Peonies scattering / two or three petals / lie on one another.”⁴

A couple years ago, for the length of one year, I wrote a haiku-a-day. It was experiment, an attempt to acquaint myself with practicing and evolving my interpretation of a genre. And while I wrote many pitiful haiku, I forgave myself and silently remembered Basho, “*haikai* exists only while it’s on the writing desk. Once it’s taken off, it should be regarded as a mere scrap of paper.” After the year, my eye had trained my mind to notice subtle changes—or to find something where there first appeared to be nothing; even the blandest days were worthy of poetry—indeed, sometimes those bland and empty days make the most effective haiku. On these damp and gray days of mid-March, a single red-breasted robin is utterly breathtaking. The arrival of the first crocus breaking the frozen earth purples the mind’s eye, and the geese stepping off melting ice into the thawed pond are metaphor made literal—all of winter’s struggle gracefully slipping away. In this way, haiku shapes perception and is a poetry of noticing; it teaches its practitioners to see and accept what is in front of them.

By no means a haiku poet, I suspect the refinement of seasonal sense perception experienced by the haiku poets corresponds with Thoreau’s late work, as he moved increasingly toward his journal and natural history projects. His *Kalendar*, one of the most ambitious and fascinating projects in American literary history, sought to cultivate and catalogue this very kind of awareness. People have long made calendars and almanacs in order to find spatial-linguistic patterns through which to attempt to make sense of their experiences with seasonal changes. In its raw form, chronicling such patterns is challenging work—it is life-work with no sign of

completion. And while these days, we live in a world where computer systems can map incredible amounts of data on climate and geography, a world where smart phones show us storms so we don't have to smell them, I wonder what becomes of sense perception and seasonal memory. I wonder what happens to seeing what is in front of us. I wonder what happens to noticing.

Not so many years ago, folks used to write things down with paper and pencil, and calendars were a practical tool used to recall and record. Calendars provide spatialized representations of temporal experience; they create boxes for days, and offer up space to notice and take note. Perhaps for these reasons, Buson's haiku, "The old calendar / fills me with gratitude / like a sutra,"⁵ is another one of my favorites. *Sutra* in Sanskrit literally refers to a thread, although that literal thread, in Buddhist literature, becomes associated with aphoristic statements and condensed teachings. *Sutra* derives from *siviyati* "sew," which is a cognate with Latin *suere* "to sew." Buson's haiku precisely hits the mark. In a way, a calendar is a literal sutra—a material sewing together of diverse sense perception and a record of phenomenal experience. As such, it is not surprising it fills the poet with gratitude.

Thinking through elongated scales—ecologically, globally, geologically—will always involve imagination. Such thinking explores the threshold between the biological edges of our senses and the seemingly infinite reaches of the mind's eye. Such thinking requires dwelling on the verges of sense perception—and projecting beyond the edges of phenomenal experience. However, as much as we reach into such imagined terrains, it is still necessary to cultivate attention to our phenomenal experience—experience unmediated by weather reports, internet buzzing, and stacks of statistics. I am referring to experience that breathes the local air and keeps a sharp eye on what's happening in the backyard. In other words, the practice of noticing and taking note. Perhaps more importantly, I am talking about the sobering reminder of our human condition to both sense and recall the information that we, more and more, seem to rely on technology to tell us.

The work of remembering seasonal experience is humbling, and in some cases, is limited by the power of memory—of our limited ability to both keep and process records. When I asked my students to think of the winter four winters ago, most of them were silenced and had very little memory. One took out her smartphone and shared some statistics about that year being also very cold. When pressed further, they had trouble remembering the weather last summer. Despite our technology's ability to remind us of the past, I think it is safe to say that we cannot see into the future. As Wendell Berry offered in a recent interview, "I don't like to talk about the future very much because it doesn't exist, and we don't know anything about it."⁶ The future is always speculative and projective. Still, so much current writing on the environment obsessively attempts to predict what is ahead. I am thinking of my students again, my touchstone of popular media and culture, and how one recently said, with full certainty, that a massive epidemic will wipe out the population within the next fifty years. In general, if left to talk amongst themselves, my students will spend the whole session predicting what is in store for us. Such discussions are not to be criticized. It is undeniably important to open forums of discussion where individuals can examine history and theorize scenarios and possible solutions in light of the precarious future. But the question still begs to be asked, as a culture obsessed with talking about the future, what does this obsession make of our present?

These are questions and issues charged with urgency. We live in a global world and are facing, what feel like, global crises. We know what the earth looks like from space and both our scientific and humanistic theories remind us how contingent we are as individuals and yet how

perplexingly destructive we have been as a species. How are we to think about all this? How do we experience changing climate? What is the best way to respond to uncertainty?

Wendell Berry refers to our current moment as the “dreadful situation that young people are in” — “a situation that’s going to call for a lot of patience.”⁷ Rather than force solutions on the earth, Berry advocates stepping back and listening to a place; for many twenty-first century Americans, listening is not easy—and is something that must be practiced like any other skill. And though not exactly a haiku writer, Berry’s “Sabbath Poems” also beautifully demonstrate a continuous sensibility akin to haiku perception. Writing a poem each Sunday for dozens of years, Berry’s poetic ethos suggests the need to walk in the open air, to take notice, and perhaps even praise the day’s offerings. Instead of thinking we know what is coming, we need to practice perception of the present and learn to listen to what a place is asking of us. What does the soil say? What grew in the garden last year? What birds have you noticed? What bees? And the tree that you planted? And the other trees, how have they filled it? What does the air smell like? How is this year different than last year?

Perhaps it seems very small and inconsequential to argue for patient poetic perception amidst the urgency of contemporary sustainability; but, while my interdisciplinary colleagues are doing critical research on alternative energy, coastal erosion, and urban planning, as an environmental humanist, increasingly, I find myself advocating quiet time in the garden. Perhaps changing climate might just teach us something about perception; as seasons become more dramatic and extreme, perhaps it is worth, taking a step back to cultivate *furabo*, a poetic spirit that Basho explains as encouraging “one to follow nature and become a friend with things of the seasons.”⁸ Even if “nature” in the Anthropocene seems humanly altered, and therefore no longer the idealized Nature of Romanticism, there is still a world out there; we are still taking the air into our bodies, we still experience the weather, there are still trees, birds, insects, and flowers. Basho describes how, for the person who “has the spirit,” of *furabo*, “everything he sees becomes a flower, and everything he imagines turns into a moon. Those who do not see the flower are no different from barbarians, and those who do not imagine the moon are akin to beasts. Leave barbarians and beasts behind; follow nature and return to nature.”⁹ In the age of climate crisis, can we still become intimate and make friends with “things of the seasons”?

Wherever these questions might lead, I do know that it was a cold winter. But now, as it has every year of my life, spring is coming. In a few years, will I remember this cold winter? Will this year’s extremity remain in memory—or merely blend into an unfolding river of change? What polar vortexes are still left to come? What I can see today is how the dirty snow is melting, slowly following the hills back to the sea. The children in the park are laughing and the florist on the corner has put out her flats of pansies. The season is changing. The snow drops arrive and the hostas are breaking through the thawing soil. I am beginning to experience spring, like I have, every year of my life. Perhaps even more so this year after such a hard winter. The future is beyond us. For now, let’s work on noticing the present.

*The snow is melting
and the village is flooded
with children.*

¹ Robert Hass, *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, & Issa* (New York: Ecco, 1994) 153.

² William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*. II.i.5-9.

³ Hass, 233.

⁴ Hass, 44, 105.

⁵ Hass, 124.

⁶ Wendell Berry, interview with Bill Moyers, “Wendell Berry and Wendell Berry on his Hopes for Humanity,” Bill Moyers & Co. PBS. October 4, 2013.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Hass, 237.

⁹ Ibid.