

# Revelations: Unedited

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I was a bit apprehensive when asked to contribute to this column because I don't think there is a "secret" to writing haiku—at least not one that I know. Each poem is its own moment and is approached from a different angle and mindset, so any "secret" must take these mathematically large possibilities into mind. Flexibility any one "secret" would have difficulty achieving. That said I do have a couple things I try to keep in mind when I write.

The first is easily (and often) said but was perhaps the hardest to learn: Try to approach poetry with openness to experience, leaving all preconceptions behind. I believe strongly in experiential haiku and an insistence on letting things talk for themselves. In the past I have argued that from a reader's perspective wholly made up poems are indistinguishable from experiential ones, so there shouldn't be a stigma against desk-ku, in fact it shouldn't even be a topic of discussion; that perspective, however, is from the reader's point of view. As a writer, I want to expand my knowledge of the world and myself. A poem that is wholly made up, while possibly successful in a reader's eye, is only successful to my writer's ego. For me this was a hard lesson to learn because I was raised in a society in which we are taught that things mean other things. Stars and tea leaves tell our fortunes. A black cat can't cross my path without my recognizing it as a bad omen. This symbolism is equally true regarding literature. I was taught that Frost's "Stopping by Woods..." is not about stopping to watch the snow fall, but is about the meaning of land ownership. So I learned to approach poetry as if the poet was saying, "Let me tell you something through something else." Further, there is a whole network of journals and websites that want our poems, and that we want to be published in. Editors we want to impress. So our first instinct is to show off, to tell the editor something amazing. We think of the end result first. We think of meaning. "I'm going to write a poem about a cow chewing cud juxtaposed with a co-worker because I'm trying to show... etc..." But instead of leading with what I am trying to say, with what I want the objects to say, I should listen to the objects themselves.

What is remarkable about letting an object speak for itself is that it allows you to discover something new about it. You will never find anything new, much less report on anything new, if you approach your subjects with your mind already made up. Poetry should be about discovery and each true thing deserves more than my preconceptions.

Fay Aoyagi said at a recent HPNC reading that she liked "the idea of everything—a tree, a flower, a lake, a stone and a house—having its own spirit." I couldn't agree more. It is our job as poets to find that spirit. Equally remarkable about letting an object speak for itself is that it allows you to potentially discover something new about yourself—to find your spirit. Years ago I wrote the poem,

daffodil shoots—  
all these years  
as an accountant

I had been walking up the front path of our house and noticed that the daffodil shoots had started to come up. This wasn't surprising since I had planted the bulbs. But as someone who was raised on the beaches of Southern California I am fascinated with the emergence of spring in wintry New England. I found myself wondering about the internal clock of daffodils and was oddly surprised that some bulbs in exact situations were slightly different in their timing. I could have easily walked by the bulbs and thought in my accountant mindset that they were right on schedule. Instead, by taking the time to look at a few bulbs among the many, I discovered something new about bulbs, and also about myself. It was a lesson to be less than accountant.

*Poetry is a balancing act.* As writers we are all misunderstood. That is fortunately(!) the nature of the short poem. Words are abstractions, so the less words we use, the more abstract and general our poems become—and more open to reader interpretation. And haiku are the least wordy poems! It is important to remember that each poem is two poems: the writer's and the reader's. As a writer I want to express my discovery in just enough words to lead the reader to discover what I did, but I don't want to tell them too much or they lose their discovery. Follow this poem of mine through its specifics:

bird call	bird call	loon call
a boulder	a boulder supports	a boulder supports
stairs	stairs from the lake	stairs from the lake

I obviously didn't write the poem this way, but I think it is useful to illustrate how our perceptions change as the poem gets more specific? Perhaps you heard a crow or songbird in the first two versions? Or placed the poem in the desert. In a perfect world, my discovery would balance the reader's discovery. But that is often not true. But because that happens, it doesn't mean either side failed. Perhaps the reader's perception or history of "loon" is different than mine. Don't feel bad if a reader's reaction to your poem is different than you intended. It is important to understand that once a poem leaves the poet, it is open to other interpretations. As a writer it is our job to minimize that difference, but not at the expense of the reader's own discovery.

*Haiku can have meaning.* Some people insist that haiku don't mean anything. That they are just a direct observation of nature as it is. While I agree that a river is just a river and has no extraordinary significance in the objective universe, it can mean something further to me, personally, subjectively, at a certain point in time. Otherwise I am just writing pictures and a camera could do a much better job than I ever could. My first guideline mentioned the

importance of letting things speak for themselves, and while this should always be true, it doesn't mean they will have the last word. It is important to be unafraid of where the poem's meaning leads you. As beginners we are inundated with rules. Yet a moment of perception has no rules! This past summer I wrote the poem,

mountain pass  
my brothers stride  
longer than mine.

As I recited this poem to myself until I could pull pen and paper out of my pocket (much to the annoyance of my brother who rightly thinks such jottings are excuses to catch my breath) I played with the word order, and in one version used "his stride" in the second line. That reminded me of a letter from someone who thought I was a Christian writer and when I thought of the poem in that light it created a whole new poem with a very different meaning. Yet both poems do mean something to me. One is a commentary on how two people can confront the same thing differently; the other my confrontation with the nature of God. But both were discovered after the experience spoke for itself.

*Nature as the subject of poetry* . In 2004 Dee Evetts asked the question: why do so many poets who live in urban areas write poems primarily about Nature? A fair question considering the Western tradition's focus on experiential moments. At the time I responded that nature had a natural cycle that urban life was missing. I'd add now that nature also has an immediacy missing in modern life. For example, I know I get paid twice a month, so I can call in sick once and a while, plus I get Saturday and Sunday off to hike, play some golf, etc. A hawk I see sweeping the field on my Sunday outing doesn't have that luxury. If he doesn't find food he starves. He doesn't have time for hobbies. That immediacy is something both scary and yet vital. And perhaps missing from our lives. I think we write about nature to connect with that missing immediacy.

*It's an American (Canadian, British, Indian, etc.) poem*. In talking to some haiku poets recently I was surprised to learn that they were not Modern Haiku subscribers—Modern Haiku, the grand dame of haiku journals! —or subscribers of Acorn, Mayfly, etc. Collections of Basho, Buson, et al are fine, but poetry journals and collections by our contemporaries are where we see what writers here and now are writing—people in the same environment with often the same concerns as ourselves. I am not trying to write an ancient Japanese poem, but a modern American one; and I suspect others are doing the same. Write about your discoveries.