

one image haiku

by Marlene Mountain

Most Western haiku are comprised of two images. This technique--one kind of *renso*, or association of ideas--often suggests mysterious relationships between or among things. The following are excellent examples:

a phoebe's cry . . .
the blue shadows
on the dinner plates ¹
Anita Virgil

pregnant again
the fluttering of moths
against the window ²
Janice Bostok

Muttering thunder . . .
the bottom of the river
scattered with clams
Robert Spiess

60 stories
of glass:
the summer moon ³
Michael McClintock

These haiku do not tell us how to feel but rather invite our participation. Each is what Alan Watts calls 'wordless,' that is, the poem 'drops the subject almost as it takes it up.' ⁴

This technique, however, has been championed so often that other kinds of haiku are not readily appreciated. One-image haiku, for instance, has been questioned by those who model their haiku exclusively on Basho's:

Withered-branch on crow's settling-*keri* autumn-nightfall ⁵

Robert Spiess, in trying to point out the invalidity of one-image haiku, has stated that a crow on a branch is a 'single image having two components' and cannot stand alone. ⁶ As it was not Basho's intent that the crow image be seen as a separate poem, this example hardly justifies Spiess' thesis. One must look to poems which intentionally employ one image with two components:

Temple-bell-on settling sleep butterfly *kana* Buson

Whereas Basho intensified the mood and deepened the significance of his crow haiku by including autumn nightfall as a backdrop (one questions its validity as an image), Buson allows his image to stand alone. We are not concerned about the season or time, but rather feel the butterfly's acceptance of a place to settle.

Basho, also, wrote single image with two components haiku:

Looking carefully,--
A shepherd's purse is blooming
Under the fence. 7

By dropping the superfluous opening comment, and assuming all haiku poets look with care, the structure--flower under the fence is the same as crow on a branch. And in the following single image haiku one of the components is newly missing:

Roadside mallow as-for horse by was-eaten-*keri*

In yet another haiku by Basho, two 'components,' though separated by *ya* (often translated as a colon), form a single image:

Cuckoo voice stretch-across : water's top

An excellent example of a Western two component haiku is Virginia Brady Young's:

A hippo shedding the river 8

Through a few words we experience the relationship between hippo and river.

Two other fine examples:

Sunset dying
on the end of a rusty
beer can . . .
Gary Hotham

spring breeze
puffs through the skeleton
of a bird 9
Raymond Roseliep

There is another kind of haiku which could be called pure one-image haiku. The Japanese masters often employed this technique:

Autumn deep neighbor as-for what (acc.) do person *zo* Basho

Spring-sea all-day-long undulating undulating *kana* Buson

Big-firefly waver-waver thus pass-through-*keri* Issa

Dragonfly's face as-for mostly eyeball *kana* Shiki

Westerners, too, have written pure one-image haiku which effectively express Watts' definition of a good haiku as '. . . a pebble thrown into the pool of the listener's mind, evoking associations out of the richness of his own memory':

an empty elevator
opens
closes

Jack Cain

A second image or even a seasonal reference would have destroyed this and the following haiku by Cor van den Heuvel:

the shadow in the folded napkin ¹⁰

Each is a powerful example of wordlessness; each, in Watts' words, 'has the whole universe inside it.'

Though haiku is a three hundred year old modern art often anticipating concepts of the Minimalists of the 20th century, the Japanese poets were obliged to stop just short of such purity. Consider Basho--in the land of cherry blossoms--writing:

sakura [a cherry (tree); cherry blossoms]

He came close. But because of the seventeen syllable convention he was obliged to write:

Many - many things bring to mind cherries *kana*

Today's critics and poets would frown on such an unnecessary comment. But what Basho was unable to do, Cor van den Heuvel did:

tundra

Like *sakura*, tundra is a beautiful sound. However, while *sakura* is an immediately beautiful image, tundra is not. As crow on a withered branch enlarged 'poetic beauty' for the Japanese, so tundra should for us.

'tundra,' published in 1963, has an effect not unlike Minimal Art of the 1960's which discarded the painterly paint of the Action Painters, the colorful color of the Op Painters and the popular culture of the Pop Painters and in the process rediscovered shape. Those artists (Stella, Newman, Kelly, Judd, etc.) and van den Heuvel have given us what Watts has described as 'a silence of the mind in which one does not 'think about' the poem [painting] but actually feels the sensation which it evokes--all the more strongly for having said so little.'

One-image haiku are not necessarily short:

Their way
of filling the whole night:
round eyes of the owl ¹¹

Foster Jewel

looking deeper
and deeper into it:
the great beech ¹²

John Wills

spotting an antelope--
that long moment
before he jumps ¹³

Elizabeth Lamb

Emerging hot and rosy
from their skins--
beets!

Anita Virgil

Crow/autumn nightfall was not Basho's only style. He was a true poet sensitive not only to images around him but to creative expression. Contemporary Westerners should be even more aware. After all, there is not THE haiku: but EACH haiku. And it is this very fact that has kept haiku alive in Japan for three hundred years and enabled other cultures to experience and create it.

The crow silently flew off ¹⁴ Hosai

notes

- 1 This and all other Western haiku, unless otherwise specified, appear in Cor van den Huevel's THE HAIKU ANTHOLOGY, Doubleday/Anchor, New York, 1974.
- 2 Haiku Magazine 6:1 & 2.
- 3 New World Haiku 1:1.
- 4 This and all other of Watts' quotes taken from the chapter, 'Zen in the Arts,' THE WAY OF ZEN, Pantheon Books, Inc., New York, 1957.
- 5 This and all other transliterations are Harold Henderson's in AN INTRODUCTION TO HAIKU, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1958.
- 6 Modern Haiku 7:4.
- 7 R. H. Blyth, HAIKU, V. 2, Hokuseido Press, Japan, 1952.
- 8 'Reader's Digest,' The Reader's Digest Association, Inc., Pleasantville, New York, Feb. 1977.
- 9 STEP ON THE RAIN, The Rook Press, Derry, Penn., 1977.
- 10 Cicada 1:3.
- 11 'Cicada 1:1.
- 12 Cicada 1:3.
- 13 in this blaze of sun, From Here Press, Paterson NJ, 1975.
- 14 Frogpond [[]] 1978; translation by Stephen Wolfe.

Tweed 7:1 & 2 1978 Australia; A HAIKU PATH, Haiku Society of America