

Back to the Future

by John O'Connor

In 1994 Kenneth C Leibman, in accepting an article of mine for *Frogpond*, said he thought it was "of educational value especially to the many newcomers" of the time. Over the next few years this "newcomer" trend became an influx and caused a (now widely acknowledged) decline in the quality of international haiku in English. Consequently, I left the scene I had joined the 1980s precisely because of its seriousness and achievement. Nonetheless, I stayed in the New Zealand haiku community, but have now left it also.

There are two problems, as I see it.

Firstly, haiku basics are no longer well understood. Yet without them it is impossible to write good haiku. The articles I've published over the years are still as necessary as at the beginning. Essentially, they point to foundation texts: Harold Henderson's *Haiku in English*, Cor van den Heuval's *Haiku Anthology*, William J Higginson's *Haiku Handbook* and Cyril Childs' *First New Zealand Haiku Anthology*. (I recommend the "Guidelines for Writing Haiku" in the last. It's a reasonable starting place, if a consensus view.)

Secondly, our Haiku Society of America-derived mode of haiku seems to have run its course. In other words, it needs refocusing, reinventing, refreshing (whatever terminology one wishes to use). Better still would be its replacement with something local – something of our own.

The hard-won 1980s HSA-mode – once so fresh in the hands of poets like Marlene Mountain, Anita Virgil and Nicholas Virgilio – is now so worn/explored that, in my view, even the best contemporary poets here and overseas struggle to match that earlier vitality.

Admittedly, one can experiment: Concrete, dadist/found, surreal, shape, txt, direct speech (single voice), persona/accent, graphic-word, split word, rhyming, traditional- or European-structure, organic/alternative structure, syllabic, metre and L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E haiku. All have been writer, or would be easy to write as samples.

A variety of other experiments suggest themselves:

[Colour haiku](#)

**across the red day –
a flight
of blue ducks**

**black rain –
black house
the black street**

and why not, given the acceptance of this approach in other arts? Sensory

adjectives and adverbs are often unproblematic. It's the abstract, cliché-leaning ones, such as beautiful/beautifully, horrific/horrifically that cut the reader out of the poem.

[Overt absence haiku \(leaving inferential space for the reader\)](#)

**not
in the plum tree –
blackbird**

[Omniscient observer haiku](#)

**“Hi,” she said
feigning pleasure –
add blue sky**

[Assonance and alliteration haiku](#)

**cell –
entering the ceiling
cockroach**

[Two-voice haiku](#)

**“there,” he growled, pointing –
“sure,” she smiled
dropping the jug**

[English and another language haiku](#)

**marama –
his moko
fading**

(In this case English and Maori. Marama = moon; moko = tattoo.)

But such things are side issues, interesting in themselves, but unlikely to realign the form. Perhaps such experiments could provide an interval of relative interest while a specifically New Zealand, internally coherent approach is developed.

At the time the HSA approach was “imported” – in the late 1980s – it was the only viable option. Trying imperfectly understood models hadn’t worked at all for some 30 years. On the other hand, the HSA template was flexible, proven in English and clearly explained. It “took” almost immediately. By the 1990s numbers of quality haiku were appearing in our previously much-abused Poetry Society competition and anthologies originated by the late David Drummond.

But the original, long-standing New York-centred HSA of Henderson, Elizabeth Searle Lamb et al had, by the mid-1990s, morphed into a decentralised fast-growing HSA which, within a few more years, found itself operating within an enlarged, ever-enlarging international haiku “community”.

It goes without saying that quality and vitality are not compatible with such numbers, nor with what had become an “encouraging” ease of publication. The core poets and critics of the original HSA came to an informed working consensus

after study and intense debate (see *A Haiku Path, the Haiku Society of America 1968-1988*). Today's haikin are in a less geographically fortunate, but otherwise no less challenging, position.

Clearly, one cannot usefully debate with a world movement. If New Zealand haiku is to find a way again, and preferably its own way (as Japanese haiku has had to at times over the centuries) it will be best found/created/developed by serious haiku poets working together in an appropriate forum – as apparently in Australia and Britain, where some elements within their haiku communities appear to have struck their own distinctive notes/approaches. (Remember they didn't have a head start on us as movements. Our haiku was more healthy than theirs throughout much of the 1990s.)

Given that New Zealand haiku poets of the calibre of Helen Bascand, Ernest Berry, Tony Beyer, Nola Borrell, Owen Bullock, Cyril Childs, Catherine Mair, Joanna Preston, Patricia Prime, Sandra Simpson, Barbara Strang, Andre Surridge, Richard von Sturmer and Alan Wells are still active, to say nothing of the more recent, equally talented haikin intakes, I think we can realistically hope for the emergence of a local haiku that neither ignores, nor uncritically accepts, the usual haiku guidelines.

Some questions:

How many colloquial indicators of haiku, such as "Haiku, what is happening now?" apply to Haiku in English?

Which assumptions lay behind which indicators?

Looking at the formal, developing HSA (and other) definitions of haiku over the years, what the common, the core and the divergent elements?

Which, if any, of the standard "haiku guidelines", and also Henderson's "rules" are outmoded and why?

Which, if any, common guidelines might said to be unclear, even meaningless?

And so on. We need to re-examine the basics, if only for clarification and confirmation in most cases.

From this point on I encourage you to generate your own questions, but please include:

Which factors can contribute to positive national character (perhaps with a regional variation) in the arts?

Without being serious – i.e., without wide reading and intelligent, open-minded debate in an appropriate forum – a legitimate type of local haiku has no chance of coming into being.

This is the last of my 30 brief, critical pieces on haiku for various publications since 1988. The haiku above are my last to be published for the foreseeable future. Other types of poetry now interest me more. But it would be great to come back some time to find New Zealand haiku confident, competent and, above all, itself.

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Editor's note: John O'Connor (1949-2015) believed himself to be, along with the late Ruth Dallas, one of the first in New Zealand to write haiku seriously, developing his interest in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 2001 he received a Museum of Haiku Literature award (Tokyo) and in 2011 published *Bright the Harvest Moon*, "haiku and renga imitations", which included typographical symbols and typefaces to pay homage to the Japanese masters of earlier times. His haiku were published widely and he won numerous awards. John was also a well-known long-form poet.

He wrote this article especially for Haiku NewZ.