

## Haiku as Poetic Spell

by Martin Lucas

Haiku as an English-language form now has fifty years or so of history. There have been many trials of new approaches along the way, and much has been learned. At the same time, it's probably true to say that only a minority of writers stay the course. For many, it's an enthusiasm that burns brightly for two or three years—sometimes with brilliant results—and then burns itself out, as the writer comes to feel that s/he has exhausted either the potential of haiku or his/her own potential as a haiku writer. One consequence of this turnover is that although individual writers may make great strides very rapidly, the movement as a whole evolves much more slowly, and from certain angles it now looks as if it has reached something of a plateau. This plateau is a position of conformity, complacency and mere competence. And the pressures towards conformity are acute enough to make it difficult to remain true to your own original inspirations, poetic preferences and little awkwardnesses that resist hammering into shape.

To understand the context of this discussion, we need to appreciate that haiku in English developed largely using translations as models. Translations tend to concentrate on conveying content with accuracy, sacrificing any attempt to replicate formal effects such as rhythm and alliteration. The historical consequence of this has been that poets writing original haiku in English have focused on what is said and paid relatively little attention to how it is said. The internationally accepted formula runs something like this (expressed here in 5-7-5 for my own amusement, though 5-7-5 is now outmoded as far as the arbiters of taste are concerned):

seasonal ref'rence—  
then two lines of contrasting  
foreground imagery

Seen in isolation, any one of these haiku can be impressive. Taken in quantity, the effect is numbing. For my point of departure I turn to Modern Haiku, not to single it out, because suitable examples abound, scattered like the innumerable stars right across the haiku firmament. But Modern Haiku comes close to the pinnacle of general respect, and the haiku I am using was highlighted as an award-winner in 40/1. This helps to make the point that it's not bad haiku but generally accepted good haiku that are holding back the development of the form. With my profound apologies to Lynne Steel, because I could have chosen a haiku by any one of us, here it

is:

Indian summer  
the old fan slows  
to a stop

*Modern Haiku 40:1(2009) p. 8*

Let's be clear: it's a good haiku.

If it had been submitted to Presence, I would very likely have accepted it. But in Presence it would have kept company with haiku of more divergent kinds; it would have been less centrally representative of the journal's guiding aesthetic. It is centrally representative of the haiku not only in Modern Haiku but in most of the other quality journals, whether print or web, and the Red Moon and other anthologies. It does what so many others are trying to do, and it has been selected for a best-of-issue award because it does it well. It is a good example of its kind; it's the kind I object to. For one thing, it fits the formula too well. There it is—the well-worn seasonal reference, followed by the significantly juxtaposed foreground image. You're only 23 poems into this same issue of Modern Haiku when you meet your next "Indian summer" haiku:

Indian summer  
a knowing look  
on the face of a pumpkin

*Alan S. Bridges, Modern Haiku 40:1 (2009) p. 15*

While this one conjures a very different mood, it is nevertheless structurally identical. It fulfils identical rhythmical expectations, and the repeated encounter with this pattern throughout this (and many another) journal contributes to an almost hypnotic reading experience. To analyse Steel's haiku more positively: the obvious focus is on the juxtaposition, which contains elements of both comparison and contrast. The year is drawing to a close, just as the fan is nearing the end of its useful life. But the year is flickering unexpectedly to life, whereas the fan is passing quietly away. It's an intriguing mix, but almost all the interest is in this content, and almost none in the expression. I do note three s-words that end the lines and may contribute to the general feeling of lassitude, and a preponderance of single-syllable words that may mimic the old fan's stuttering decline. But since all these word choices, not to mention the layout choice, are the most obviously appropriate to sketch the moment—appropriate, at least, in the eyes of a practised haiku writer—it's hard to determine whether their formal qualities are anything other than accidental. Content rules, and the

sole function of form is to convey that content as lucidly as possible. This it does well, but I do not feel I am being unfair in claiming that this appears to be the limit of its ambition.

Having outlined my point of departure, I will draw all my remaining examples from #37 of my own journal, *Presence*. This is partly for the sake of convenience, and partly because they are, by definition, to some extent representative of an apparently different guiding aesthetic. In recasting haiku as *Poetic Spell*, I wish to emphasise, firstly, an ideal that is poetic as opposed to prosaic, and secondly, an expression that is more akin to a magical utterance than a mere report of an incident, however consequential or inconsequential.

I make no claim that every haiku in *Presence* conforms to this poetic ideal. Nor do I think it desirable that it should. A complete issue of a journal should offer a variety of angles and a varied reading experience. *Senryu*, and some of the simpler kinds of descriptive haiku, can contribute to the total quality of this experience, even if individually they are nothing more than fragments of prose. On the approach to the ideal, some haiku of exceptionally resonant content read very much as poems, however fragmentary, even without any significant contribution from form. At another pole, we should have no difficulty in accepting as poems those haiku whose formal and language qualities detain us, independent of any consideration of their information content.

To approach the *Poetic Spell* via imagery often appears to involve nothing more than mere description. The difference is that what is described is somehow so satisfying that we linger in the moment, and almost seek to dwell in it. This resonance is more readily evoked in rural scenes that have about them something almost primitive or archetypal, than in urban scenes that so often rattle with the shallowness of modern social life. I'm not saying by any means that it's impossible to write resonant urban haiku, but resonance is a natural consequence when the human focus shrinks and the horizon expands:

mountain home the distant clunk of the cattle grid

*Pamela Brown, Modern Haiku 40:1 (2009) p. 26*

paddy field by the river ...  
the voice of a farmer  
speaking to the bulls

*K. Ramesh, Modern Haiku 40:1 (2009) p. 32*

The first of these centres on a relatively modern contrivance, the cattle grid, but the implications of solitude and silence, not to mention the opening phrase, suggest the ancient lineage of Saigyō's tanka. The second, set, I feel confident, in India, seems to stand in a direct line of inheritance from Bashō's Japan. There is such profound satisfaction in the image that even without any notable contribution from the language, I'd happily regard it as an example of at least one kind of Poetic Spell.

To approach the spell via language, we need more emphasis on form as opposed to content, and on expression as opposed to information. This haiku by Tito has it:

Rained from the morning's  
Clear blue,  
Settling on peony petals, too  
Ash from Mt Asama.

*Modern Haiku 40:1 (2009) p. 12*

It is constructed indirectly, delaying resolution until the final line; with the unusual opening of a passive verb that is also marginally metaphorical. It has evident alliterative patterning—"peony petals", "Ash / Asama"—and, crikey!, a rhyme. Tito, a.k.a. Stephen Gill, has been writing this style of four-line haiku for very nearly as long as *Modern Haiku* has been publishing, but very few have followed his lead, and outside his local circle in Kansai, Japan, this approach is almost entirely neglected. This is in many ways unfortunate, because this rich four-line style offers far more poetic nourishment than the clipped three lines of the international formula. If I had to speculate on the reasons for this neglect, I might suggest that in the very act of giving the poem such a defined beginning, middle, and end, the prized directness of haiku has been sacrificed. But I might also suggest that a rich four lines requires more effort from the writer and more effort from the reader, and in a creative community notorious for its short attention span there are too few willing to do this little extra work.

Without departing at all radically from the familiar three-line format, it's possible to approach the Poetic Spell through both imagery and language. This haiku by Matthew Paul does so, though it may stand in need of some explication:

on a day the colour  
of rolling tobacco  
ragged-robin

*Modern Haiku 40:1 (2009) p. 19*

To access the haiku it's more or less essential to be able to visualise "ragged-robin", or at least to know that it's a flower. Found in verges and woodland margins, it's barely knee-high, and its beautiful pink flower is cut into thin filaments—so "robin" probably from the colour, and "ragged" from the shape. One criterion of the Poetic Spell would be original rather than conventional use of season-words, and this poem meets that test immediately. In imagery, too, it has no apparent antecedents—I know of no other haiku that compares the day to "rolling tobacco"! This has to be an exaggeration—even the old-fashioned London smogs were hardly a thick tobacco brown. I assume it's the sky that's meant, but it might be the landscape, or it might be a subjective mood. It certainly seems to feed into a mood—a kind of depression, perhaps, that's so intense there's almost a perverse pleasure in it; and growing out of it, complementing it, or fulfilling it, or counteracting it, there's the unassuming wayside flower, frail and lovely. Original thought; original imagery; and, with its unobtrusive alliteration, pleasingly musical language. Importantly, it also resists definitive interpretation. My own speculations about "depression", for instance, might be well wide of the mark as far as the writer is concerned. It's very much the reader's poem.

Even greater fluidity, ambiguity and reflectivity are made possible by the single unpunctuated line, deployed with striking effect in the pages of *Presence* over the years by my friend and colleague Stuart Quine. Stuart's lead has now tempted so many to follow that, for the first time in #37, I found myself discouraging one-liners, rather than encouraging them, as a necessary step to avoid devaluing the currency. The one-liner has great potential for authority, inevitability and ineffability. It heightens both ambiguity and immediacy, and seems more tolerant of effects that are in essence poetic rather than prosaic, without any sacrifice of the haiku ideal of image-based understatement. Here are four favourites from *Presence* #37:

hatless the seeds of winter in the morning sky

*Duro Jaiye, Modern Haiku 40:1 (2009) p. 26*

torn clouds the horse's black tail trailing

*Pamela Brown, Modern Haiku 40:1 (2009) p. 26*

my sister skating here comes her yellow hat

*frances angela, Modern Haiku 40:1 (2009) p. 29*

sharpening this night of stars distant dogs

*Stuart Quine, Modern Haiku 40:1 (2009) p. 29*

What we notice immediately in each of these examples is a driving rhythm, which makes the decisive contribution in transforming each of these fragments into something akin to a spell or charm. Equally we notice that this rhythm, and the placing of pauses and stresses, varies considerably from poem to poem. We cannot—on the basis of these examples, at least—draft any kind of formula. There is nothing here akin to the predictability of the “Indian summer” haiku with which we are, by now, over-familiar. In relation to the idea of haiku as charm, Stuart Quine sees a connection with dharani. He asserts that, although mantra and dharani share structural and rhythmic similarities, they have different functions. Mantra are means of centring and settling the mind, whereas dharani are essentially invocations. However, it is important to realise that dharani are not calls upon Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The dharani is in itself the manifestation of the particular Buddha or Bodhisattva invoked. The dharani of Jizo Bosatsu is the actualisation of Jizo Bosatsu. Nembutsu, similarly, actualises Amida Buddha and the Pure Land.

In considering a haiku-spell, it’s hardly possible to determine who or what is being invoked. Yet the idea has relevance in the sense that for the charm or spell, the final effect depends on the totality of the utterance: form and content unite, and the latter does not claim all our attention. I find a prose paraphrase of Duro Jaiye’s poem impossible, because I can’t with any confidence say what is happening or what it’s about. I assume it’s the poet who is “hatless”, but we’re tempted by the fluid syntax to attach the adjective to the seeds. The seeds may be actual seeds of some late-flourishing plant or tree, or this may be a poet’s way of saying “the signs of winter”, early indications, something like that. Although I took “winter” as a season-word and placed the poem on the winter pages of *Presence*, I could readily accept an interpretation that placed it at any time of year after the summer solstice. Where you place it in time in turn colours your interpretation of “hatless” and its associated moods. This ambiguity is of the essence: you can’t nail it down; you can’t boil it down; and you can’t say it any other way. The form of the poem, in its authority and inevitability, adds dimensions far beyond the information-value of its content.

Pamela Brown’s seems easier, until you start to analyse it. It’s stitched together by alliteration, as if in imitation of the tapping of a horse’s canter. The internal comparison suggests the tail either is, or appears to be,

ragged or “torn” and, in reverse, the clouds are, if not “black”, then dark, threatening, and moving on a rapid wind. All other background clues are absent—is there a field? is there a fence? is there a rider? is there actually a horse at all, or just the suggestion of a horse in the tail-like threads of cloud? We can make our own choice, but we can’t know for certain. It’s fundamentally resistant to any kind of reductionist solution.

Frances Angela’s, by contrast, seems absurdly easy to paraphrase. Surely this isn’t poetry at all, but two prose sentences run together: “My sister (is) skating. Here comes her yellow hat.” But running them together, in a single breathless utterance, results in a masterpiece of what I call “non sequitur” haiku. The poetry of the yellow hat lies not in its relevance but its irrelevance. If you’ve read R.H. Blyth, you’ll know that time and again he counsels against cause-and-effect in haiku. If you explain something, you explain it away, and all the poetry seeps out like air from a slowly punctured tyre. Here there’s no explanation. Everything builds to the climax of the yellow hat as if it were the most meaningful thing in the world; yet in terms of prosaic everyday meaning it has no obvious significance whatsoever—other than being attached to the head of a sister, with whatever feeling that conveys; and even this is conjecture, since the hat may have fallen free. Like an object in a dream, it is preternaturally pregnant with importance, and it’s this bare-faced irrationality that makes this a poem.

The unintentional inspiration for Stuart’s haiku was probably my own at dawn the din of distant dogs, but that’s by-the-by. His haiku conjures a radically different scene, and what a contribution is made here by the opening word! Its appropriateness is not in question, but its prose equivalence eludes us. Is it a night of “sharp” frost? Is it therefore cold and harsh, and colder and harsher against the background of dogs barking? Well, something like that, no doubt, but that’s not actually what the poem says. What it says is

sharpening this night of stars distant dogs  
and this is the starting-point and the ending-point of each reader’s  
individual reflection. Through the clarity of imagery, feeling emerges: a  
cold, dark, sharp feeling that is at the opposite pole from sentimental  
assumptions of what makes a poem, far more alert, far more alive:

sharpening this night of stars distant dogs  
There is no other way of saying it. That’s what I mean by Poetic Spell.  
Words that chime; words that beat; words that flow. And once you’ve truly

heard it, you won't forget it, because the words have power. They are not dead and scribbled on a page, they are spoken like a charm; and they aren't read, they're heard. This is what I want from haiku: something primitive; something rare; something essential; not some tired iteration of patterns so familiar most of us can produce them in our sleep. It's not the information content that counts, it's the way that information is formed, cooked and combined. Poetic spells don't tell us anything, they are something, they exist as objects of fascination in their own right. You can hold them in the light and turn them about and watch each of their facets gleam. They begin and end each reader's unique reflection.

Martin Lucas, with Stuart Quine

Concluding note: the appended table outlines the "battle positions" between what I'm calling the International Formula and the Poetic Spell. Note that no one poem will exhibit either set of characteristics perfectly. Some that are written to the formula possess one or more characteristics of the Spell, and others that I'd want to class as Spells possess one or more characteristics of the Formula. It's also possible that a haiku written in close conformity to the formula nevertheless appeals as a lively and satisfying piece of work, while one that possesses many of the outward qualities of the Spell somehow falls short on inscrutable charm.

Nevertheless, as a generalized table of opposites, this account holds true and is potentially useful.

International Formula	Poetic Spell
Predictable seasonal phrase, in predictable position	Original seasonal phrase, in unusual position
Predictable word order and "cut" position	Original word order and "cut" position
No significant word music or language effects. Predictable rhythm.	Significant contribution of word music and language effects—notably rhythm
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Essentially rational—prose paraphrase possible	Essentially irrational—prose paraphrase not possible
Can be analyzed in terms of information content alone	Cannot be analyzed in terms of information content alone
A written form, not readily memorable	An oral form, readily memorable
Linear / Static	Circular / Fluid
Clear	Ambiguous
Reductive / Descriptive	Expansive / Reflective
Simple	Complex
Confirms security	Induces insecurity
Goal: acceptability	Origin: integrity