

LANGUAGE AS VEHICLE *Theme & Meaning in Haibun*

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In his book *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*¹, Lee Gurga points out the risk of writers attempting haibun 'before they have acquired sufficient skill at writing haiku'. 'Fine prose with poor haiku,' he says, 'makes poor haibun.' But the reverse is also true: fine haiku with poor prose also makes poor haibun.

*What your story has to say will gradually reveal itself to you and your reader through every choice you as a writer make . . .*²

*The writer must decide what larger meaning the story represents and lead the reader to that.*³

Both these quotes come from writers' handbooks I have on my bookshelf. The first is a guide to writing fiction, the second to non-fiction but they both share an acknowledgement that our written stories, imagined or experienced, need to mean something to our readers and that making writerly choices ensures meaning will be communicated.

Haibun writing possesses its own specific craft challenge, i.e. the effective balance of prose and poetry, but its effectiveness also relies on craft choices that are common with other genres, choices that will engage a reader, assist in elevating the writing above personal anecdote or pretty description, and help develop theme.

What do I mean by theme? For me, theme is what my haibun is about **combined with** what I think and feel about it and my aim is for readers to leave the page also thinking and feeling in response to my words. While the first spontaneous draft of my haibun might be, for example, about my teenage daughter leaving home, I recognise that it will also need to be imbued with meaning. So, what do I think and feel about that subject? What are the ideas and emotions behind this story that might engage a reader? Fear, perhaps, for my child's unchaperoned future? A sense of loss, an absence in my life that I feel, at least for the time being, cannot be filled? But what about the idea of freedom and the feeling of joy? After all, I suddenly have my own life back after 18 years of daily mothering.

Once I've identified my theme then I can begin to make language choices that will lead the reader towards it. But what I don't want to do is to be overtly didactic in my writing, metaphorically shouting at a reader, 'Look, this is about loneliness/fear/absence.'

Some haibun might be far less obviously idea-based; they might originate from a response to a natural or urban landscape. But, for the most part, we still need to locate an overall theme, whether it's the ability of a sunrise to make us believe we can start over again or the sound of rain that encourages us to question certain decisions we've made in our lives. I won't deny the success of some haibun where a single paragraph of beautifully written description is completed and expanded by the juxtaposition of a particularly fine haiku. But, generally speaking, description needs to be more than just pretty; do more than just literally describe. It needs to be significant too: i.e. suggest ideas and emotions to a reader.

One way we can avoid both the 'didactic' trap and the 'pretty description' trap is to use language as a vehicle for our ideas.

1. Concrete language: the sensory experience

Concrete language is expressed and experienced through the senses: what we can see, smell, taste, hear

or touch – trees, the sea, strong coffee, a train, velvet curtains – as opposed to abstract words like hope, fear and success which embody ideas. That's not to say a writer should never directly express an idea, or use an abstract expression, but that abstractions and generalisations need to be realised through or balanced with an appeal to the senses.

Concrete language offers 'proof' of scene, character or even dialogue: it convinces a reader at physical and emotional levels. And our ordinary everyday language is rich with suggestiveness and innate metaphors that can help make our writing significant. At a very simplistic level, the image of a woman wearing a short, red dress carries connotations – ideas and judgements – that are very different from a woman in a long white one; even if a writer goes on to subvert the reader's expectations of those images.

Take a look at the following haibun by Cara Holman.

Counting⁴

"Did you know a plane flies over your house every seven minutes?" Dad asks. I didn't know that. Dad is checking his watch again. "There goes another one," he says triumphantly. I check my watch. He's right. It has been exactly seven minutes. Dad likes to measure things. He was a scientist, before he retired. He taught me how to measure my pulse, how many steps to take before letting the kite string out, and how to count the gap between lightning and thunder. In his world, everything is precise and orderly. The hospice nurse says he has six months or less to live. That's a lot of airplanes.

deepening twilight . . .
one by one
stars appear

The language in Holman's haibun is the recognisable concrete language of daily life: planes, houses, watches, kites and the weather. Yet every image seems to reinforce the theme of the relationship between the elderly father and his daughter and of his approaching death. **As a reader** I did not consciously catalogue every image and its effect when I first read the haibun. I simply read it with enjoyment, felt the emotions of intimacy and loss, thought about my own ageing parents and pondered the man-made measurement of time that marks our days, in both senses of that word. **But as a writer** I'm interested in identifying why and how it affected me. I can learn by analysing the language choices Holman has made.

The images of the pulse measuring, the kite string and the thunder and lightning were the most vivid for me. And because the haibun explicitly states a father/daughter⁵ relationship the ideas of (i) caring for someone, (ii) letting them go, and (iii) teaching them to negotiate fear and danger all emerged from those three things.

After several readings other responses arise. The 'seven minutes' has an echo of the seven ages of man that Shakespeare identified and links to the father's age and ill-health. The measurement of time and its diminishment juxtapose poignantly with the eternity that the stars in the haiku suggest. And while the 'Counting' of the title is the father's time-keeping as well as something a child learns to do, it is also what an adult daughter finds herself doing as her father's life approaches its conclusion: the years already past, what time remains.

It's a wonderfully balanced haibun and although there are other elements that contribute to its success – e.g. the use of dialogue for immediacy and character development, the rhythm and variety of sentence structure, as well as that lovely link and shift from prose to haiku – the concrete language is a

fundamental reason why it speaks so eloquently to me.

2. Figurative language: simile and metaphor

Anyone can make comparisons and our language is littered with 'dead' similes and clichéd metaphors – *lonely as a cloud, he laughed like a hyena, the rosy fingered dawn* – all of which might have surprised and delighted at some time but through overuse have lost their freshness. You might regret that expressions like, 'eyes like pools of stars' or even 'eyes that flood with tears' lack any energy for a contemporary writer but they have been repeated so often they have become shorthand for emotion and lack any vital force. As a writer if we record an emotion without that felt force, without felt depth, the reader can lose their trust in us as their literary guide.

We need to create new and surprising figurative images, not to decorate our texts, but to provide a sense of illumination. The goal of literary comparison is to enlarge and enrich the scope of our own and our readers' understanding. But there are pitfalls. Similes and metaphors that ask the reader to make too large a leap between the objects being compared, either explicitly or implicitly, or step too far away from the subject matter also risk losing the reader's attention. Executed with a heavy hand they call attention to a writer trying to be clever or entertaining. A good metaphor fits so neatly that it fuses to and illuminates the meaning. And perhaps the biggest pitfall: the overuse of figurative imagery. Think of it as seasoning rather than a principal ingredient. A lightness of touch is essential. One, or two, considered and well placed figurative images might be all you require to support your overall theme, the ideas you want your readers to take away with them.

Bill Gottlieb's haibun, below, confirms these points about appropriateness and lightness of touch. The single apt simile he employs (*limbs like bats in a rack*) both connects to the scene he describes – watching baseball – and is cruelly suggestive of how a terminal illness can affect the body: inactivity, dis-use, feeling wooden, perhaps, and numb.

Win-Loss⁶

Baseball is always relaxing, you said our last summer on the couch – in cancer's coma, limbs like bats in a rack, game over – as the Phillies, two years ago the winningest team in baseball, were losing, losing. Loss wasn't as fun for us. But the men were good men, trying as hard as men can, mostly failing, and you loved them. And you loved life around a diamond, a gem of time, a few hours when you could defer to fate, be a fan, a hopeful person, winning never out of the question until the last second, when the small dense ball massed into a mitt and they lost, you lost – my favorite enthusiast – and I lost. Tonight I lie on the couch where you died and narrate the ninth to another woman who has fallen in love with the game, my game. She admires a man who doesn't stop when he is losing, a determined man, a man who endures an ending, plays again.

I can never
catch you
full moon

And look at that subtle metaphor in the middle of the prose – *a gem of time*. It refers literally to the diamond of a baseball pitch or field but also deepens our insight into the preciousness of this moment of ordinary enjoyment that may not be repeated. And, of course, the ideas of winning and losing are threaded through the haibun as lightly but as firmly as silk and we are pulled between the losing baseball team and the characters' negotiations with life and death.

3. Language as symbol

In Gottlieb's haibun the 'small dense ball massed into a mitt' not only lives within the game, but also, given the context, symbolises cancer's vile and determined presence.

The writing process itself is inherently symbolic. We work only with words but in structuring events, depicting character and atmosphere, choosing object, details and language, we are selecting and arranging for these words to signify much more than their material existence.

In everyday life too we constantly function symbolically. In quarrels or conversations, how often do we say one thing but intend something else? *Did you pick up my dry-cleaning?* can mean, *I bet you were too busy thinking of yourself to even consider me.*

Jonathan Humphrey's haibun uses everyday language to create a fantasy world that symbolises a very common human right of passage.

How To Disassemble Your Father's Ghost (Winter)⁷

by Jonathan Humphrey

We suffer each other to have each other for a while.

Li-Young Lee

The night your father's ghost appears, take his old pocketknife from the drawer in the study and have him sit down in the chair. First you must cut the apparitions of his ears. He will ask for you to skip them like stones across the wooden floor. He has always wanted to know this sound. Next, you must sever the opaque tongue from the back of the opaque throat. Cast it into the fire. He will smile, as it tastes like bourbon. Close the knife. Return it to the drawer. His heart will be easily retrieved from the cloud-like chest. It must be fed to the dog. Wake the dog and feed him heartily. Your father's ghost gives you this order without reason. Slowly he will stand and walk to the sliding door by the back porch. Follow him out into the snowy yard. Watch as he stretches his arms. Be prepared to stare until morning. When the wrens wake, they will dart through his body until it is riddled with holes. What remains will lift like fog, burnt off by a trepid sun.

were my father alive
green shoots
pierce snow

We suspect by the end of the first sentence that this might not be the territory of ordinary life. Once we've read the second we are in no doubt. The world Humphrey creates is both ethereal and violent: 'apparitions' and the cutting away of ears and tongues. We know this is imagined or dreamt yet we suspend disbelief because so much of this world is like our own: a pocketknife, a study drawer, wooden floors, bourbon, a fire, a dog, a door onto a porch, snow, a yard, wrens and fog. They are so familiar they provide a platform that persuades us to accept the fantasy. But, at the same time, because we know it isn't real we can't help but try and work out what these images and actions might symbolise.

To 'disassemble' means to take apart or dismantle, and we often do that to machinery to repair or to understand its workings so there's a sense here that the father's ghost is being disassembled in an attempt to come to terms with his death and even the man he used to be. The emotional tone of the haibun is mixed: the epigraph talks about us suffering 'each other' and the physical violence committed on the ghost prevents hearing/understanding, speech, and perhaps even the capacity to love with the destruction of the heart. Yet the violence is softened by the father's smile, by the childlike image of skipping stones, the 'cloud-like chest', the snow, the darting wrens and the fog. Somehow this makes

sense. Grief is rarely one dimensional, rarely black and white; our relationships with parents can be complex and confusing too so the juxtaposition of imagery, the way the language shifts us between violence and softness, anger and compassion, dislike and relief, is entirely convincing.

Using language as a **vehicle** suggests some sense of movement, a way of transporting the reader towards thought and feeling. I recently came across the following words by American poet, Mary Oliver: 'Attention without feeling, I began to learn, is only a report.'⁸ Reports can be interesting, even alarming, for their factual content but they rarely move us. For me, Mary Oliver's idea of 'feeling' comes from the human element of a story, and a writer's honest emotional and intellectual engagement with the world, whether that's animal, vegetable or mineral.

But honesty is hard-earned by writers. It requires us to question ourselves, what we think we believe, our aims and intentions, and whether what we have to say is worth sharing. We need to go deeper into ourselves and deeper into the language at our disposal to do the best we possibly can.

Footnotes:

1. Modern Haiku Press 2003 pp.121-122
2. Burroway, Janet, *Writing Fiction, A Guide to Narrative Craft*, Longman 2000
3. Kramer, Mark & Call, Wendy, eds, *Telling True Stories, A Nonfiction Writers' Guide*, Plume 2007
4. First published in *cho* vol 8 no 2
5. I've assumed daughter, as opposed to son, because of the autobiographical tone of the haibun. But the narrator could as easily be a man.
6. First published in *cho* vol 10 no 4
7. First published in *cho* vol 10 no 2
8. *Our World*, Beacon Press 2010