

Haiku and the Personal

by Vanessa Proctor

pregnant again ...
the fluttering of moths
against the window 1

Many of you will be familiar with this haiku, first published in the second edition of Cor Van Den Heuvel's *The Haiku Anthology*. It's Janice Bostok's work, of course. 'pregnant again ...' gained a wider audience when it won the 2002 Seashell Contest run by Martin Lucas of Presence. It's one of those haiku that I would have loved to have written myself. It resonated with me, even before I knew what it was like to be pregnant. The judges of the Seashell Game also liked it enough to make it the winner from over a thousand entries, ancient and modern, from poets around the world. What interests me is the fact that the majority of the Seashell game judges were men who would not have directly experienced this particular situation. So why does this haiku speak so powerfully to so many people about something that isn't necessarily a shared experience?

It is an incredibly personal haiku (what could be more intimate than carrying a child?) and it is this idea of the personal that I would like to explore in this paper. From this intense experience of carrying another life we are given an insight into something universal, the idea of birth, creation, our very existence. This is not just a woman's poem, this is a poem about humanity. The first line could have so easily read 'pregnant', but 'pregnant again' ties in the poet's own experience with the idea of being part of something greater than ourselves. Our own life cycle is part of a system of all living things which in turn links us to the natural world. The poet knows that one of the most wonderful aspects of carrying a child is experiencing the kicks and movements of the developing foetus in the womb, connecting the mother and this new life through the sense of touch. I now know through my own experience that the mother is more likely to feel the baby moving in the evening, as she winds down at the end of the day. The setting of this haiku is at night and the tone is gentle with 'the fluttering of moths/against the window'. There is juxtaposition between the world inside the womb and inside the house (the domestic) and the world of nature outside (the external). All is quiet and the images are layered upon each other as we have the darkness of the womb and the moths

outside in the dark, drawn to the light in the house. Perhaps the moths have eyes on their wings as if they are looking into a new world.

There are so many elements here, layered one on top of one another, yet there is something else, an elusive magic that cannot be explained which makes this haiku not only achingly beautiful but irresistible to the reader. This moment is very much in the present, yet it applies firmly to our universal human experience. It is a wonderful thing that one single haiku can achieve so much. This haiku is filled with emotion, but the emotion is implied, as it should be, leaving the reader space to fill the spaces. The emotional content is simple and direct. What this haiku is doing is forging new connections between the everyday and the universal and reminding readers of their own humanity.

When I am leading haiku workshops or discussions about haiku the first thing many newcomers to the genre say to me is, "It's one of the rules that you can't use the personal pronoun 'I' or include oneself in haiku". First of all, I shy away from absolute 'rules'. They are useful as an initial guideline, but are essentially made to be broken. Secondly, I disagree that there is no place for the personal in haiku. It is the placement of the poet in the poem that really matters. The poem cannot be written without the poet and even if the poem seems to be a simple observation of the natural world, the subjectivity of the poet remains. Anaïs Nin once said, "We don't see things as they are. We see them as we are." Haiku have little room for the 'I' as ego (consciousness of one's identity), yet the personal aspect in haiku remains a constant.

John Bird's

spring morning
dog and I exchange
silly grins 2

is not about the poet himself, but about his relationship with his canine companion 'dog and I'. There is a mutual bond between the two. As a confirmed dog lover I was instantly drawn to this haiku which so clearly shows the poet's personal experience. While it raises a smile, it also says something essential about man's enduring relationship with his most faithful companion. One doesn't need to be keen on dogs or to have experienced a similar moment to appreciate this poem. There is a lightness to this haiku, a brightness epitomised by 'spring morning', but there is also an implied truth about man's relationship with the natural world. There is

an irreversible bond between man and dog. They understand each other. 'Exchange' is the pivotal word here. The dog has exchanged his freedom for dependence on man and man wins out all round, gaining a guard dog, a hunting companion and a loyal friend. This symbiotic relationship has been repeated over and over again for thousands of years. This haiku, just like Janice Bostok's is not just about a perceived moment, which of course is vital, but it encompasses important truths about the human condition.

Fashions in haiku inevitably change. The work of the great masters was often fairly subjective and there have been many swings and shifts in the form since the 17th century. More recently in English-language haiku there has been a trend towards a more objectively stated moment, with the subjective consciousness layered beneath to a simpler style. Charles Trumbull eloquently states that, 'Haiku expresses a Zen sensitivity—looking inward to engage the Universe.'³ This is evident in Janice Bostok and John Bird's haiku both of which make connections between experience and universal truths in fresh and exciting ways.

As readers, we are of course biased. I am certainly not suggesting that all haiku should be intimate and personal, after all, diversity is certainly something to be celebrated, but I feel that poems with too much detachment and objectivity often lack that elusive magnet which draws the reader into the heart of the poem.

To write haiku we need to have an openness to the world, to see the world with the eyes of a child and then process what we have seen as a poet. As Charles Trumbull has commented, 'The very best haiku explore our inner mindscapes'.⁴ Recently I have become more inwardly focused and interested in haiku and the domestic rather than viewing landscape as something to inspire my writing. Perhaps this is a way of reconciling my lifestyle with haiku practise. After all, at least for me at the moment with two small children, there are so many more small domestic moments than grand epiphanies. This minutiae is the substance of haiku. It's what forms our lives.

Often haiku can form a diary of one's life. That's not to say that it's about oneself, but a reflection of the life that you are living. The people you have seen, what you have observed, why certain things have made an impact on you. When I first moved to Australia nearly ten years ago, I was struck by the landscape full of strange and exciting (to me anyway) plants and wildlife. Many of my haiku reflected the experience of my daily walk in the bush. Now that these things are relatively commonplace to me and I have

written a large number of haiku about gum trees, rainbow lorikeets, possums and the like, I have found another subject – the experience of motherhood and raising a young family. The subject of family, the dynamics of which are likely to change endlessly, will be important to me for the rest of my life. Everyone has their own path and interests which change as their lives progress. Focuses shift. We need to chart this new territory and explore it in our own writing to keep our work fresh and dynamic. Ultimately we are all sharing our experiences of being human through haiku.

I was making muffins for my son's playgroup recently and it occurred to me that in baking we generally use the same ingredients – flour, butter, sugar and eggs, but we can achieve an infinite number of possibilities by slightly altering the ratio of the ingredients and by adding small amounts of other ingredients. A light cupcake can be created by combining the ingredients slowly and beating air into the mixture. The ingredients for muffins, on the other hand, only need to be folded in. If you add a tablespoon of lemon rind you can create a lemon cake, while if you add coconut, well the possibilities are endless. Life offers us limitless possibilities and so does haiku. We all share the experience of being human, but in a multitude of different ways and that for me is the joy of haiku.

So how do we make our haiku irresistible? Unfortunately I don't have the recipe for the perfect haiku. There is no magic formula. It's really about putting yourself into your haiku, adding your own magic, making your haiku your own and then sharing it.

What really interests me about haiku is that in so few words it can present us with truths about the human condition in a powerful and non-didactic way. Haiku present us with space to read behind the lines to see an image, to experience it, hear it, touch, taste and feel it and then form our own connections. We use our inner selves, our daily lives, the domestic to learn something about universal issues. In haiku I cannot help but be drawn to the personal. I find poems that speak to me about what it means to be alive are the ones that resonate long after I first encounter them.

I'd like to conclude with a very personal experience of my own which I hope speaks for itself:

after the feed
the imprint of a tiny ear
on my arm 5

Footnotes:

- 1 The Second Haiku Anthology Cor Van Den Heuvel. Winner of the 2002 Seashell Game.
- 2 NZPS 2002 Anthology A Savage Gathering. Haiku Dreaming website.
- 3 Trumbull, Charles, 'An Analysis of Haiku in 12-dimensional Space'. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Haiku Society of America, Evanston, Ill., September 20, 2003.
- 4 Trumbull, Charles, op. cit.
- 5 Presence #29. 'Echoes'. Red Moon Press.