

## Reading One-Line Haiku: Feeling the Real within the Impossible

One thought about haiku is that of the “haiku moment”—a mindful, meditative practice that captures “a moment” that happened. But does a haiku moment need to be something tangible, that physically occurred? Or can a haiku moment be internal, a wordless shift, or an epiphany that happens inside? Can a haiku moment be imaginative or based on our memories or feelings? There are as many types of haiku moments as there are types of haiku. Just because something that happened cannot be touched or seen does not make it less “real.”

How can we express something that is not tangible using concrete images, which are often used as building blocks in haiku? Let’s look at some examples of haiku that have an “impossible” literal reading but express something very real.

two slices of bread with birdsong between

– Hemapriya Chellappan

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Here’s a haiku about a birdsong sandwich. Perhaps this is about taking a break outdoors on a busy day and the grounding feeling of spending time with nature: “two slices of bread” implying lunch or a snack, with “birdsong” becoming their companion (while the protagonist may really be alone) and it is occurring “between” (meetings, classes, etc.). But let’s go beyond that. What is the flavor of birdsong? We can feel the delight of something as special as birdsong between two slices of bread. If the poet had instead used their favorite sandwich item—let’s say hummus—we might get caught in the specifics. Perhaps the reader does not like hummus at all, and the poem would evoke a negative response. With “birdsong,” we feel the goodness of what the protagonist is holding. Perhaps it’s not the filling, but the person who made the sandwich that makes it special. In another reading, it’s possible the entire haiku is a metaphor for the feeling that comes with having a really good day: everything we need and a little magic too!

the moon x the moon ÷ the moon

– Fay Aoyagi

*roadrunner*, Issue 10.1, 2010

The moon typically brings with it an element of mystery, and there could be any range of responses to this type of poem based on the feelings this mathematical statement evokes. This idea is expressed in a way that the reader experiences an unsolved secret: the moon's value cannot be quantified. Explaining the feeling would leave it flat, but instead, the poem unfolds naturally in the reader's mind. The word "moon" by itself is considered to be the full moon in autumn, a season associated with harvesting from previous work but also approaching more difficult times. This could be read as a Triple Goddess poem—each "moon" representing one of the three figures (maiden, mother, crone), but functioning as a trinity, thus one "moon." Perhaps multiplication represents the maiden phase moving into mother phase and division moving from the mother to crone? Perhaps this is three generations of women together—daughter, mother, and grandmother? Could it represent Tsukuyomi (God of the Moon) chasing Amaterasu (Goddess of the Sun and his estranged wife) through his cycles, only to wind up starting over where he began and never catch up with her (which is why we don't see her in the poem)? It could be as simple as describing the movement of moonlight across a particular room. The poem is open enough to allow the reader to discover other instances or cycles of this "moonness" and what it means to build then reduce, yet arrive back where we began. The lack of an equal sign suggests the cycle is without limit.

i stop sweating fireflies

– elmedin kadic

*light packing*, Red Moon Press, 2020

We initially read straight through this poem like the sentence: "I stop sweating fireflies." To stop sweating fireflies, the protagonist would have to be sweating fireflies in the first place, which we know isn't physically possible. But we can draw a parallel between each tiny bead of sweat and individual fireflies—the sweat beads that seem to magically evaporate and the fireflies that seem to disappear into the dark as quickly as they appear. We, too, can get this effect if we slow down our reading and pause after the word "sweating": i stop sweating . . . fireflies. One does not have to employ punctuation or

gaps in their one-line haiku to allow for an effect such as this. Readers can fill it in with their own hesitations and pauses and do not have to be forced into a particular read, thus limiting the scope of the poem. As it is written, the four words provide a trudging rhythm that complements the labor implied by the “sweating.” It is possible that literal fireflies appear after the protagonist stops sweating (perhaps after stopping an activity to rest), but it is also possible that the “fireflies” are metaphorical. Might these “fireflies” not be fireflies at all but a meteor shower, a dizzy spell, or a lover’s kiss?

acres of wildflowers holding on to my maiden name

– Antoinette Cheung

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We know flowers cannot literally hold onto someone’s name, so let’s think of some possibilities to link the concrete imagery of wildflower fields to the intangible concept of a family name. “Holding on to my maiden name” implies the protagonist has married and retained her surname of birth. Maiden names can hold meaning about identity as an individual or connect with heritage and ancestry. Perhaps the “acres of wildflowers” refer to her relation to a large and diverse family or to a specific desire to maintain a bond with her cultural identity. Perhaps they refer to looking back with fondness on more carefree, unrestrained days. Although we cannot know the specific basis of the sentiment, this is not needed for us to appreciate the feeling behind the “acres of wildflowers” image. The reader can step into the poem and experience the abundance and deep ties the poet associates with her maiden name. This image builds weight with the “holding” as we empathize with the protagonist’s desire to retain her cultural and/or personal premarital identity.

What other meanings might you draw from the above poems? As a minimalistic poetry genre, the reader will often bring something to the interpretation, context, and nuance of reading haiku, bringing an element of collaboration to arrive at the meaning(s). As we all come from different backgrounds with different lived experiences, the readings of poems go well beyond the words on the page or our presumptions about the poet’s motivation for writing the poem. We take these words in, and they get processed in our brains; we can’t assume all of our brains will process this information in the same manner. Things such as culture, education, vision, neurodiversity (autism, dyslexia, ADHD, et al.), and acquired brain injury (TBI, stroke, chronic illness, et al.) can factor in as well. What’s more, our reading of a particular poem might change over time as we change. If you have the opportunity to

work with a haiku critique group, you might discover that part of the fun is seeing how different readers find different nuances in a particular poem!

Have you read an example of a one-line haiku that uses “impossible” language to convey an authentic experience or have a new reading of one of the poems discussed here? Feel free to share in the comments!

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