

## From Issue 5: Expanding Tiny Poems Using Literary or Historical Allusions

One way a tiny poem can add meaning is by reaching outside of itself with a literary or historical allusion. Issue 5 of *whiptail* includes two examples of four-word poems that utilize this technique to express something profound without adding additional words. These external references can complete, redirect, or amend an established story.

one bed two autumns

- *Marcie Wessels*

We immediately recognized this poem as a nod to the classic poem by Shiki:

for me going  
for you staying —  
two autumns

In Shiki's poem, it seems that one partner is physically leaving. Now apart, they experience autumn differently. This observation could have occurred in any season but setting the poem in autumn evokes a feeling of sadness and loss. This poem could refer to a romantic breakup or to someone moving away.

In Marcie Wessels' poem, the separation is clearly not physical as the partners continue to share the same bed. The "two autumns" experienced by the partners might be due, for example, to a growing emotional distance. They might as well be in two worlds although they are physically together. The re-interpretation of the Shiki poem gains part of its meaning from the original and expands it to include many types of "going" e.g., socioeconomic readings relating to the modern world where physically leaving might not be an option for financial reasons or domestic violence, or a relationship where one partner is in poor health and aging at a faster rate despite them both being in the same age range, etc. Although Marcie's poem can stand on its own, evoking this reference to a classic haiku expands the emotional impact without adding length.

sojourner truth be told

- *Mary Stevens*

In our second poem, “truth” has a double meaning, both as the conventional use as a lack of falsehood, and as part of the name of Sojourner Truth, an outspoken leader for the abolition of slavery and an early advocate of women's rights. She is quoted as saying, “I feel safe in the midst of my enemies; for the truth is powerful and will prevail.”

If the poem was just “truth be told” or even “traveler truth be told,” we would agree with the sentiment but might feel something was missing. By using the name “Sojourner Truth,” we immediately feel the fearless commitment that is sometimes needed to tell that truth. This specifies whose truth is to be told—not only her own personal truth, but the truth of all African Americans, especially women, for whom she advocated. The historical reference in the poem adds weight and power without adding words. And while Sojourner Truth may have passed in 1883, and progress has been made, the truth about the mistreatment of African Americans in the U.S. still needs to be heard.

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