

Shhh, Don't Tell Anyone: The Backstories of Two Vertical Haiku by Chuck Brickley

Always be open to possibilities. If I had been more attuned to the single-line vertical as a viable form, a few of my haiku might have found their ultimate expression sooner. In one case, a lot sooner.

One swallow...enough
when drawn from as deep a well
as this¹

The above haiku appeared in George Swede's seminal *Canadian Haiku Anthology* (1979). In retrospect, I was more keen on the natural epiphany that inspired it than the haiku itself. I do recall liking how the short third line, playing against the expectation set up by the first two, added import to the word "this." Still, it seemed wordy. Several years later I wrote the following revision:

just one sip
from as deep a well
as this^{2,3}

At the turn of the century, I decided to make hand-sewn gifts of a manuscript I had been developing off and on since the '70s.⁴ Considering which poems to include, I came across "just one sip." What? Had my revision been 'phoned in,' stripping the poem bare? Did this, or even the first version, evoke the magic of my original experience? It was back to a clean sheet of paper for me.

¹ *Canadian Haiku Anthology*, edited by George Swede, Three Trees Press, 1979.

² *Haiku, Anthologie Canadienne/Canadian Anthology* ed. by Dorothy Howard & Andre Duhaime, editions Asticou, Quebec 1985.

³ *The Twenty Year Itch, an Anthology* (Hope Writers' Guild) Erica Press, 1994.

⁴ *The Haiku Anthology* edited by Cor Van Den Heuval, Simon & Schuster, 1986 (unpublished; *earthshine* noted in my author bio).

one sip...enough
from as deep a well
as this

one sip
enough from as deep a well
as this

one sip
enough
from as deep a well
as this

I liked reinserting “enough,” but sensed it needed more emphasis, more space. I started to play around with the form. Three lines became four, five...soon, each word wanted to have its own line. As I scribbled down the paper, my mind raced to catch up. Was the haiku becoming a...? Yes, it was. A vertical!

one
sip

enough

from
as
deep
a
well
as

this
5

The form graphically suggests movement from a taste of water to its source, a sensory experience to a deeper sense of mystery. I hoped the centered text would speak of the ‘centering’ process I had felt originally, and during the storm-calm of re-creation. My ‘natural epiphany’ had at last found its organic form.

Years later, I dusted off my manuscript once again, and began the process of deciding which poems to keep, which to cut. The following seemed okay:

⁵ *earthshine*, Snapshot Press, 2017.

Using my hands

near the crest of a rockslide:

a tiny white bloom⁶

Is okay enough? Does it need revising? I copied the poem to the center of a new sheet of paper and, applying the practice of *freefalling*, wrote all around it whatever came to mind: flower names, quotes, song titles, hiking trails. The latter jarred the memory of a completely different experience:

One summer morning, hiking alone in the Cascade Mountains, I decided to climb a somewhat formidable rock face in order to continue my ascent. I was more than halfway up before realizing the gravity of my situation. I was not only not going to reach the top, I may not be able to get back down unscathed.

noon sun—

climbing down the rock face

I face...

Close, but not there yet. I turned to my *secret title* trick, one that helps me focus on what I really want to say. An uncharacteristic bravado had forced a scenario of me-against-the-mountain, man vs. nature. I had lost the battle and was in danger of losing the war. Several titles came to mind before I settled on “Existential Cowboy.”

Now I was excited. I turned my scribbled paper over and started to riff on my *secret title* (shhh, don't tell anyone!). Thinking of my battle scenario, I replaced “climbing down” with “backing down” to indicate my retreat. I made a list of showdown cowboy movies I had seen at Saturday matinees back in the '50s: *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*, *Johnny Guitar*, *High Noon*. Looking back at my haiku, I replaced “noon sun” with “high noon.” The latter, even for those unaware of its allusion, would more effectively heighten the intensity of the moment. There was room in the upper right corner of the paper, where I wrote “high,” then under it, “noon.” I continued one word at a time down the right edge of the paper until, as if written by itself, appeared a vertical single-line, right-aligned haiku!

⁶ *Frogpond* 2.2, 1979.

high
noon

backing
down
the
rock
face

I
face
7,8

The reading of each word from left to right, and back again, suggests the poet's tenuous descent; the right margin, the rock face. The final two words create an ambiguity: the poet, face to face with stone, is also faced with mortality—death implied by truncated syntax, the void by white space below.

The manuscript I've been referring to? The one distilled for several decades? It became my collection of haiku, *earthshine* (Snapshot Press, 2017).⁹ It includes both single-line haiku verticals discussed here. I hope their backstories have proved of interest, the techniques employed, useful. Along with *freefalling* and *secret title*, the *spin-off* helped spark another, more unique poem. Always be open to possibilities.

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Chuck Brickley (he/him) is an American Canadian currently living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Chuck, as the 2nd Vice President of the Haiku Society of America, coordinates six of its international contests. His collection of haiku, *earthshine* (Snapshot Press, 2017), was awarded by The Haiku Foundation's Touchstone Award (2017), the HSA Merit Book Award (2017), and Haiku Canada's inaugural Marianne Bluger Book Award (2020). Nearing the end of its fourth printing, *earthshine* is available at Snapshot Press or www.chuckbrickley.com.

⁷ *bottle rockets* 31, 16.1, 2014.

⁸ *earthshine*, Snapshot Press, 2017.

⁹ Ibid.