

## Slip-Realism *across the single line of haiku* by Alan Summers

Slip-Realism [my term] often includes the very things considered “offstage” (behind-the-scenes) and perhaps overlooked in haiku as it’s not the “main action.” I’d like to present an argument that it can be beneficial to go *behind the scenes* with our one-line haiku.

My creation of Slip-Realism was inspired by Elizabeth Hazen’s haiku collection *Back Roads With a White Cane*, and surveillance training. The habit of ‘close’ noticing small details can be life-saving, and in Elizabeth’s situation, when she lost almost all of her sight, it was vital to notice things she could no longer see.

*“When I became blind...my awareness of place and the present moment sharpened. On regaining my sight I found that...haiku could connect all the layers of perception I had experienced, without bogging down in a confusion of emotions.”*

– Elizabeth Hazen, *Back Roads With a White Cane*, Saki Press (2001); Brooks Books Joint Winner, Virgil Hutton Haiku Memorial Award Chapbook Contest 2001-2002

Elizabeth Hazen became a student of “*astute noticing*” when she lost her sight for three years. We often rely on sight a little too much, other senses coming second, such as sound, taste, smell, and touch—yet they equally inform us.

*“Peripheral perceptions have long absorbed my attention. And haiku of the bearing still jump out at me in my walks.”*

– Elizabeth Hazen, snail mail correspondence with Alan Summers, (October 2013).

Elizabeth didn't write single-line haiku, but if she did, the tercet (3-line verse) from her collection would work powerfully across one line:

so much sparrow song  
in the shape of a bush  
falling snow

so much sparrow song in the shape of a bush falling snow

The consonance of 'sparrow'; 'song'; 'shape'; and 'snow'; the long sounds of each of those s-letter words, and the surprise of an end rhyme "so" and "snow" which I hadn't noticed in the original tercet, produce a soothingly rhythmic poem. If we continue with the one-line re-imagination of Elizabeth's 3-line haiku, I employ different internal pause/breaks to give me reading choices of appreciation:

so much sparrow song in the shape of a bush // falling snow

I like how this one can be read as if the bush is actively *falling* snow, making it fall almost from a playful shake of its branches:

so much sparrow song // in the shape of a bush falling snow

Here, I'm reminded of William Carlos Williams where he opens "The Red Wheelbarrow" poem with *so much depends*:

so much // sparrow song in the shape of a bush // falling snow

This last “invisible” pause/break interpretation gives me “*so much falling snow*” on either side of “*sparrow song in the shape of a bush*”

e.g.

**so much** // sparrow song in the shape of a bush // **falling snow**

All the different readings, made available by a single-line haiku, feel rewarding. I also appreciate the aid given by those little heroes of grammar (conjunctions, prepositions, indefinite & definite articles) with ‘*so*’; ‘*much*’; ‘*in*’; ‘*the*’; ‘*of*’; and ‘*a*’ alongside ‘*falling*,’ which is the verb, and doubles as an adjective to my eyes.

There is always a little more to our ‘*daily incident*’ occurrences, however mundane or low down on our radar, that is food for one-line haiku. A little extra detail can point to a larger event.

**Let’s go through some of the senses, with a few examples:**

## **SOUND**

crowded train a dozen yellows crackle

Alan Summers

*Does Fish-God Know*, YTBN Press (2012);

*Per Diem* (The Haiku Foundation, 2018)

I have placed the sound as more important than the “visual” main stage. Some of us may recall very busy public transport where certain sounds cut through, such as wrapped flowers as gifts, whether to cheer the sole occupant of an apartment, or a loved one waiting.

I've used the *consonance method* to emphasise the packed atmosphere:

***crowded*** train a dozen yellows ***crackle***

## **SOUND and VISION**

(plus seasonal reference)

postman's whistle the starling's bill changes to black

Alan Summers

Presence #68, November 2020;

"What is natural history haiku?" *Blōō Outlier Journal*, Issue 3, 2022

The European Starling's bill changes to yellow in Spring, and black in Autumn. There was a postie who regularly whistled, was it them, or the famous mimicry of the bird? I've played on this question using the *noun possessive* with 's: Various departments of grammar achieve more than just simple punctuation.

***postman's*** whistle the ***starling's***

It's surprising how adaptable one-line haiku are, such as adding hidden consonance, almost as if attempting to imitate a line of musical notations:

postman's whistle the starling's bill changes to black

## **SOUND and TACTILENESS**

(hearing plus sensation and touch)

footsteps ring along a sidewalk the fog lifting

Alan Summers

*Brass Bell Haiku Journal* (July 2022)

Footsteps feel louder, even sinister, at certain times and conditions of the day or night. Here we have invisible sounds clinging to us almost as much as the wetness of the fog: The aural and visual oppressiveness of being unable to see and locate the footsteps can psychologically unnerve us.

The 'f' and 's' consonance, and assonance (vowels) of the repeated letter 'o' lend, and perhaps lead us to a tension until the very last word, a verb, giving us hope of an escape from a reduced set of senses:

footsteps ring along a sidewalk the fog lifting

## **TACTILENESS**

when no one's looking he touches the lily's dew

Silk~

*Frogpond* 45.1, Winter 2022

A strong off-stage observation! Two parties, one who believes they have not been seen in the act, and one party (the poet) employing *astute noticing* skills.

“*when no one’s looking*” is a strong beginning full of suspense and intent.

“*he touches the lily’s dew*” could be a child’s curiosity, knowing they shouldn’t touch. There might be more interpretations of course, all certainly tactile.

## **SMELL/SCENT/OLFACTORY**

cheap after-shave smoking on the corner

Philip Whitley

*Haiku Dialogue*, “A Sense of Place: City Sidewalk - smell” (December 2018)

A haiku where the “peripheral” takes centre-stage and avoids directly stating a human presence. We guess a person is lurking on a street corner, there’s no need to say more.

Consonance plays a part in conveying Slip-Realism and an off-stage presence (even menace) with the letter ‘c’ in “*cheap*” and “*corner*” and the ‘s’ consonance/alliteration of ‘*shave/smoking*’:

cheap after-shave smoking on the corner

However innocent, or innocuous, the use of ‘smell’ without naming the human directly, makes things feel tense: Is it a classic crime-noir scene replete with nasty after-shave and cigarette smoke, or a contemporary scene of over-applied cologne and “vaping smoke.”

## PURELY VISUAL or is it

A haiku that is dominated just by being visual need not be one-dimensional. See this intriguing sight-dominated haiku that delivers a Slip-Realism nudge or two:

family photo another maid half visible

Engin Gülez

*whiptail: journal of the single-line poem*

Issue 5: As the Now Takes Hold (November 2022)

Does the family want the maid(s) to be in or out of sight? How many attempts were made? The two groups of words “*family photo*” and “*another maid half visible*” come together creating tension in the scene. Is this a 19th Century photograph--purchased from an antique shop or tourist market-- when people had to pose completely still for ages, where if someone moved, a part of the photograph blurred?

The pronoun “*another*” and where it’s precisely placed, makes all the difference, as ‘*half visible*’ feels more intense when ‘*another*’ is planted front and centre:

family photo **another** maid half visible

Would it work as a **tercet**?

family photo  
another maid  
half visible

or **duostich**?

family photo  
another maid half visible

Perhaps the duostich works, though the one-line haiku feels stronger, emphasising “*an obeisance of servants*” intended to remain in the background, unless *posed as a backdrop*.

### **PURELY VISUAL or is it**

a wildflower breach in the barbed wire fence

Christine Wenk-Harrison  
*Frogpond* 45.1, Winter 2022

The noun “*breach*” is a useful word choice, it gives us the flavour of action. Frisson thrives where the contrast is of something alive and soft against something hard, sharp, and designed to deter/cut/slice living tissue (humans, other animals), it’s effectively unsettling. Notice the consonance or alliteration



of the “w” letter with “wildflower” and “wire.” Although *fence* might not feel required, it reinforces an intimidating obstacle that a soft element (flower) defeats.

Additional words are for various reasons, here the sound of *wire* does not quite finish in the mouth for me, thus the hard sound of *fence* brings a conclusion to my reading. Practice reading it out, perhaps add a pause after *wire* so that *fence* is read a couple of seconds later: It neatly brings the ‘w’ sounding words dominating the haiku to a close. We also know emotionally that by adding ‘breach’ that an escape route has been opened up, and the fence is not really the final word in our minds, it’s the wildflower: perhaps it was picked and then dropped by a child dragged to safety by a family member.

### **PURELY VISUAL or is it**

the vole the cat left still with grass in its mouth

Barbara Ungar

*Frogpond* 45.1, Winter 2022

That word ‘still’ can mean ‘dead’ as well as the vole has not been moved, or been cleared away, by human or cat. The vole is still there, very much still there, and the vole still has grass in its mouth, its unknowingly “last meal” interrupted by an apex predator.

**Grammar note:** The word *‘still’* is not only a conjunction, it’s an “*adverb of time*” suggesting something continues to happen. It’s a situation that’s not finished. Sometimes the word ‘still’ is a (tired) cliché, but this author has sidestepped that pitfall.

**Omission and the unsaid:** the vole the cat the human

We have the chain of life, and food, plus a little anarchy and denial of that natural order of consumption: The vole will not be eaten and digested by the cat, or by the cat's human 'owner.' The human, definitely present by *deliberate omission*, completes a hierarchy. Omission is a useful technique when used prudently, and this could be an adage about haiku composition: "*Never let everything be said.*"

While the cat left the vole with grass in its mouth, not only the vole, but eventually the cat, and the human(s) become part of a hidden dynamic of life/death and desire. We all eventually fertilise the earth beneath the 'grass' which in turn brings me to Matsuo Bashō's *summer grasses hokku* (composed June 1689):

夏草や兵どもが夢の跡

Transliteration: 夏草 = summer grass 兵 = soldier 夢 = dream 跡 = remain

natsukusa ya tsuwamonodomo ga yume no ato

Romanised version (romaji)

summer grasses the soldiers a trail of dreams still

English version: Alan Summers

Slip-Realism is close observation, astute noticing, which turns into our one-line haiku where it's supported and endorsed by how we embrace grammar to our advantage. Grammar is **syntax** (how we

bring words and phrases to work well together); **semantics** (our own cache of words and phrases); and **phonology** (the sounds of our speech we bring into poetry). And **Slip-Realism**, those off-stage moments, or perceived out-of-sight incidents we witness. Haiku often thrive on small and underrepresented detail, which sometimes point to a bigger picture to lend an added edge and tension to our haiku. We want to pull a reader along that single line of poetry weaving in and out of our world. We want a reader enticed enough to return more than once, or twice, or thrice, to visit again and again, to re-read our work, to be further engaged with the world we brought to them. We want two worlds to collide (writer and reader) in mutual kinship.

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**Alan Summers** is a double Japan Times award winning writer, filmed by NHK Television (Japan) for “*Europe meets Japan - Alan's Haiku Journey*”; a Pushcart Prize nominated poet for both haiku and haibun, as well as Best Small Fictions nominated for haibun. He is a former President of the *United Haiku & Tanka Society* (2017 to 2021), Editor Emeritus for the multi-award-winning *Red Moon Anthologies* (Red Moon Press, USA) for best haikai literature from 2000-2005; and previously General Secretary of the *British Haiku Society* (1998-2000). He is a former Embassy of Japan ‘*Japan-UK 150*’ poet-in-residence, published/supported by the *BBC Poetry Season* website at that time.

Alan is currently editor-in-chief of *The Pan Haiku Review*, while planning expeditions to far planets, though really it’s a tour of the British coastline with Karen Hoy!

Founder, **Call of the Page**

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