

From Issue 7: Form, Fit, and Function: Thoughts on Vertical Haiku

At *whiptail*, our definition of what constitutes a one-line poem is open and inclusive. Per our submission guidelines, we will consider “monostich haiku, senryu, one-line tanka, poetic fragments, one-line micro-poems, or lyrical lines.” We are also interested in poems presented in “any shape a line may take.”

Issue 7 contains an exciting and eclectic mix of one-line poems. Some are written horizontally. Others, vertically. We even have a few concrete poems! I suspect that the majority of the vertical poems were written specifically for this issue’s *whiptail* challenge. (Thank you so much for embracing our call for vertical poems!)

I have long had questions about lineation. Why do the Japanese prefer to write their haiku in a mono-linear (one-line) format? What are the advantages of using the single-line in English? (For more thoughts on the single-line poem, please see the *whiptail* contributor interviews.) Why are most English language haiku written as tercets? What exactly is a duostich? Why do some poets write four-line haiku? As you can imagine, after reading the submissions for the vertical challenge, I have even more questions!

The Japanese tend to write their haiku in a mono-linear (one-line) format but I’ve seen Japanese haiku written both vertically (Buson scrolls in Stephen Addis’s *The Art of Haiku*.) and horizontally (*Blue Willow Haiku World*). Which orientation is correct?

It turns out the answer is both!

The Japanese write in two directions. In the traditional *tategaki* (縦書き), or vertical format, characters are written in columns from top to bottom, with columns ordered from right to left. In the more modern, *yokogaki* (横書き), or horizontal writing style, characters are read from left to right, as in English.

“When published in a book, Japanese haiku are almost always written vertically,” explains fellow haiku poet and translator, Alex Fyffe. “This is also true of novels, other poetry, and dialogue in manga. When haiku and prose are written online, they are almost always horizontal, most likely because it’s easier to format left to right when typing.”

Given the fact that writing conventions are different in English than in Japanese — in English, we read and write from left to right and top to bottom — can we make a case for writing a poem in a single-line vertical in English?

First, let's consider the following axiom: form follows function.

“Form follows function” is a principle of design associated with late 19th and early 20th-century architecture and industrial design. Coined by American architect, Louis Sullivan (1856-1924), this idea means that a building's purpose should be the starting point for its design. That is, the shape of the building or the object should relate to its intended function or purpose.”

Sullivan's protégé, Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), later expanded Sullivan's dictum, claiming that the phrase “form follows function has been misunderstood. Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union.”

To consider how form might help create meaning in a poem, let's consider the following poems from Issue 7:

depression
limbo
how
low
can
I
go

- *Susan Burch*

Susan could have written this senryu on depression in a single horizontal line,

depression limbo how low can I go

but the magic in Susan's poems comes from the interplay between form and function, or between the poem's structure and its meaning. According to Merriam-Webster, limbo is defined as 1) an uncertain,

transitional place or state, or 2) a dance contest which involves bending over backwards and passing under a horizontal pole. While both definitions inform my reading of the poem, let's consider the second definition as it pertains to the format. At the heart of Susan's poem is a strong juxtaposition; depression, a serious mood disorder, and limbo, the joyful and exuberant dance contest. While there is nothing fun or funny about depression, this seems like an apt metaphor for a mood disorder especially when we consider the poem's layout. In Susan's vertical poem, she places each word on a single line. This obliges the reader to read each word slowly. The slight natural pause at the end of each line slows down the eye and adds weight and gravity, (as in seriousness), to the poem. The staggered indent creates a slight curve, which not only replicates the bent back of a limbo contestant, but is the visual representation of the poem's speaker buckling under the ever-increasing weight of their depression.

inch
by
inch
dates
up
cast
fore
the
snow
spring

- Carly Siegel Thorp

Like Susan, Carly uses the vertical format to great effect. As readers, we expect Carly's poem to follow English language conventions when it comes to directionality. That is, we expect to read the poem from the top down. However, syntax (sentence structure) and semantics (meaning) are disrupted when we read Carly's poem the standard way.

inch by inch dates up cast fore the snow spring

The intended meaning of Carly's poem, or the meaning that makes more linguistic sense, is only made when we read the line from the bottom up.

spring snow the fore cast up dates inch by inch

In this case, the vertical line and its inverted direction contribute to the meaning of the poem. Form follows function. The vertical line replicates the accumulation of spring snow.

Several of the one-line vertical poems in Issue 7 play with elements of concrete poetry. According to critic Roberto Simanowski in his article, "Concrete Poetry in Digital Media," "concrete poetry deals with the relation between the visible form and the intellectual substance of words."

In Issue 7, Christopher Peys offers us a delightful concrete poem in which the words are the image.

soon just a s p e c k
i n t h e b l o o d
o f t h e s k y

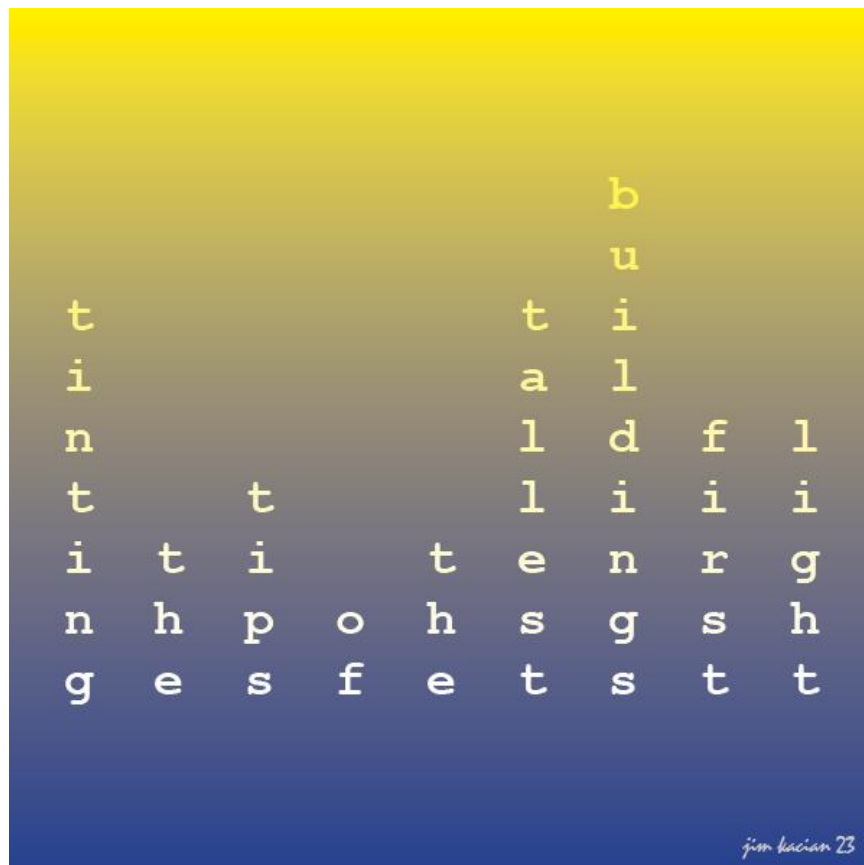
“Soon” and “just” are the only “whole” words in the poem. This suggests to me that the balloon has just escaped the speaker’s grasp and may still be within reach. The other words in the poem, the phrase “a speck in the blue balloon” are broken apart; that is, spaces are interspersed between the letters of every word, so that every word in the phrase becomes the string of consonants and vowels that comprise it.

a s p e c k i n t h e b l u e b a l l o o n

This playful technique visually depicts the ascent of the balloon and its gradual disappearance in the sky but the fragmentation of the words into individual letters reinforces the ephemerality of the moment Christopher has captured.

Concrete poems can also be “objects composed of words, letters, colors, and typefaces, in which graphic space plays a central role in both design and meaning.” (Aube and Perloff, “What is Concrete Poetry?”)

What better example than Jim Kacian’s haiga in Issue 7.



Initially, I tried to read the letters in Jim’s haiga as one tends to read in English — from left to right and top down. When I was unable to form coherent words, I was obliged to look at the work in a different way. I realized that Jim’s haiga is composed of only two elements: letters and colors. When I reexamined the visuals, it finally dawned on me (pun intended) that Jim had written the words of his poem on the vertical axis. Each column of letters resembles a building and the nine columns together look like a cityscape. The gradation of color — from yellow to blue — replicates sunrise over a city. I needn’t have struggled so hard to read the words. If I had more fully considered the visual elements at the outset, I would have realized that the meaning was already present in the shape of the poem and in the haiga’s colors.

maple
keys
a
koan
falling
upward

- *Dan Schwerin*

When we read a vertical poem, our eye travels from left to right and top down. The vertical format makes sense for Dan’s poem because it replicates the samaras’ spiral descent. But Dan throws us a delightful twist in the second part of his poem with the phrase “a koan falling upward”. A koan is “a puzzle or a paradoxical riddle used by Zen Buddhism to demonstrate the inadequacy of logical reasoning and to provoke enlightenment” (Oxford Dictionary). Instead of imagining the descent of the maple keys, I now began to think about a different direction — up! This change in direction was surprising, perhaps even a bit perplexing. The clash in direction was a clash in logic for me. Dan was playing with my expectations as a reader and in doing so, he created a poem that functions like a koan itself, prompting me to linger and contemplate it more deeply.

gospel
within

gospel
without

live
oaks

- *Cherie Hunter Day*

What is interesting about Cherie's poem is that it can be read in two directions and it still makes linguistic sense. It can be read conventionally — from the top down like Susan's poem:

gospel within gospel without live oaks

and it can be read from the bottom up like Carly's poem:

oaks live without gospel within gospel

The vertical format is the perfect choice for Cherie's poem because it provides an opportunity to create a meaning that would be impossible in a poem written horizontally. No one would ever produce the second reading — oaks live without gospel within gospel — because it just wouldn't occur to us to read the horizontal line any other way than from left to right.

To conclude, I would like to return to my original question. Can we make a case for writing a poem in a single vertical line in English? I think the answer is yes. But at what point do we consider the poem's format? Is it something we set out to do when we sit down to write? Or is it something that comes into play during the revision process? Regardless of the when, I think we always need to ask ourselves which format helps create a deeper meaning, and then make the deliberate choice that will elevate our poem.

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