

From Issue 6: Synesthesia in Haiku

When writing a poem, we often appeal to the five senses: touch, hearing, sight, smell, and taste. Our best poems, however, appeal to more than one sense or present an interesting combination of senses that reflect the multisensory nature of our experience. Synesthesia, or a blending of senses, is a particularly effective technique to make your one-line poem stand out. Consider the following poems from Issue 6.

gunshot pigeons burst open the muezzin's call

- *Lakshmi Iyer*

In addition to having an interesting juxtaposition (the violent sound of a gunshot contrasted with the melodious, peaceful call to prayer), Lakshmi's poem contains a mix of sensory imagery. While it is possible that a gunshot rang out at the same time that the muezzin began the call to prayer, it is also likely that "gunshot" is being used as an adjective to describe the sudden flight of grey and white pigeons either startled by the call to prayer or startled by someone on their way to pray.

While there are several ways to read Lakshmi's poem,

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the sensory images she blends together to describe the haiku moment—a sound (gunshot) and a visual (pigeons)—make the fright of the startled pigeons palpable.

Sight and sound tend to be the senses that appear most often in haiku. It is less common to read poems that employ the senses of touch and taste, but there are two notable examples in Issue 6. First,

the Braille of birch trees

- *Stefanie Bucifal*

Stefanie introduces the sense of touch at the beginning of the poem with the word “Braille.” Braille, the system of reading and writing for the blind or the visually impaired, consists of a series of raised dots that represent the letters of the alphabet and the equivalent punctuation marks. Braille is read by moving the hand left to right along each line. While both hands are generally used, reading is essentially done with the index fingers.

There are six different types of receptors in our skin that allow us to feel and perceive our environment. These receptors take in messages about pressure, vibration, texture, temperature, and pain and pass them through our nervous system to the brain. When the tactile (Braille) is introduced before the visual (the birch trees) in Stefanie’s poem, the sighted reader imagines the texture of the object prior to knowing what the object is.

For me, the word “Braille” also conjures up the white paper on which the code is imprinted. Although Stefanie does not specify the species of birch, perhaps she was thinking of paper birch trees. Paper birch, also known as white birch, has pale bark which peels into long, thin, papery strips. Older birch trees are often marked by dark scars and horizontal fissures known as lenticels. From a distance, these raised markings look like Morse code or lines of text on a page.

Two systems of reading the world (Braille and sight-based) commingle in this poem and the delightful mix of senses (touch and sight) demonstrates that there is more than one way of seeing and being in the world.

aftertaste of the word she wears peonies

- *Ashish Narain*

Taste and smell are two of our most powerful senses, and they are interconnected. Nerves in the nose identify smells and taste buds on the tongue identify tastes. Both external stimuli are communicated to the brain so that it can synthesize the information and recognize flavors. Just a hint of a certain aroma can evoke an emotion or bring back a memory.

Ashish begins his poem with a powerhouse of a word. *Aftertaste*, according to Merriam-Webster, is the “persistence of a sensation (as of *flavor* or an *emotion*; our emphasis) after the stimulating agent or experience has gone.” English has many idioms related to speech and taste. Lovers are said to whisper “sweet nothings” in amorous moments, but when they quarrel, they exchange “bitter” words. A disgruntled person can “chew out” another, then “chew over” the decision whether to apologize or not.

“Aftertaste of the word she wears” is an interesting turn of phrase. Do words have an aftertaste? A person who has synesthesia would say that they do. Synesthetes will often see music as a color or taste a shape, for example. Synesthesia is a powerful poetic device for those of us who do not have synesthesia because it subverts expectations. What was the woman wearing? A peony in her hair? Peony perfume? Maybe the scent of the flower or the perfume lingered in the air and the speaker inhaled so deeply he tasted it. But what if the woman was merely wearing a peony-printed dress? Or what if the “peonies” are a metaphor for blushing in response to a spoken word? The sight of the literal or metaphorical peonies (visual) conjures up a taste memory (aftertaste) that is full of emotion for the speaker. This sense-switching is what makes the poem so delightful. Whether the poem describes a pleasant or unpleasant experience depends on the imagination of the reader (as well as their culinary position on edible flowers).

Using the five senses in a poem creates a stronger image in the reader’s mind. Mixing sensory imagery helps a poet turn a straightforward sketch into a transcendent poem.

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Originally published at *whiptail: journal of the single-line poem* on February 23, 2023.