

Waveforms

Bull Island Haiku

In the Afterword to his recent collection of haiku and photographs, Pat Boran considers the attractions of keeping it small

▶ DESPITE HAVING WRITTEN quite a few haiku in recent times (far more than eventually gelled together to make this book), I don't consider myself a haiku poet, certainly not in the traditional sense.

Haiku writers these days have their own journals, their own websites, their own apparently inward-looking world. Poets working in other forms may dabble in haiku, but there is often the sense that this is but a brief dalliance, and not to be taken as seriously as their other (almost by definition) larger work.

While many of my haiku are concerned with the traditional subjects and themes of the form – nature, time, the seasons, our place in the world – their tone owes at least as much to the West as to the East (to borrow a simplistic notation). Indeed it may be that the closing couplet of the Shakespearean sonnet might have more in common with the haiku than first seems evident.

In general, English-language writers of haiku no longer stick rigidly to the 17-syllable, 3-line stanza that the name still suggests to most readers. Delicious, jazz-flavoured riffs by Jack Kerouac among many others have influenced a generation of writers for whom the name now suggests more an attitude and general approach than a rigid form. This 'opening' of

the form seems to me a good thing, though a certain amount of resistance is indispensable when it comes to testing what ideas or new formulations may be worth our while. The doubting, second-guessing imperatives of form can both supply necessary distraction and provoke occasional resolve.

HAIKU SOMETIMES RHYME, but generally they are not built for that pur-

pose. Rhyme is an accident of a given language: some languages are more blessed (or cursed) than others. (In Italian, for instance, where rhymes are almost as common in daily language as they are in verse, it might be argued that they add little real extra weight to poetic forms. In English, their comparative rarity might be seen to confer an added potency or concentration.)

Empty at first sight
unless that *is* the message —
a bottle of light.





► FOR MY PART, I like the way rhyme (both ‘full’ or partial) works to close and seal an idea, to unite the lines it spans, even as the spirit of the verse (poem or haiku), if the poet is lucky, attempts to reach beyond it. It is a tension, and a provocation to attention and memory, and it can produce a small electrical charge in the language that often brings with it some degree of illumination.

From the outset, therefore, it seemed important that these resolutely three-line forms of mine should chime or ring out briefly, that they should take root on the page almost like the marram grass of the island itself, being stitched down by their own system of roots or stays. I liked the notion of the first and third lines rhyming, the way, out on the shore on a clear day, the sky and sea might be said to rhyme with one another, with the horizon, that third distinctive

line in the middle, acting as both separation and, sometimes, as mirror. Poems that would not fit the general run of the sequence (for a kind of narrative emerges whether intended or not) I worried about for a time; disappointment seems to me the first opportunity to step back

from a work long enough to see if it might warrant further exploration.

Haiku are often viewed as self-contained, even mutually isolated poems of momentary insight (hopefully with enduring implications). But as well as acting on their own, they can also be brought together in



a variety of patterns and sequences, adding up, one hopes, to something more than the sum of their parts.

The first Japanese haiku (then called *hokku*) date from the mid 17th century and were conceived as the opening sections of longer works, often by many hands, that included 5-line forms (*tanka*) or even passages in prose (*haibun*). A form that combined both haiku and painting – known as *haiga* – would seem to be a direct predecessor of haiku-photo compositions such as my own. The many traditional arrangements and permutations are beyond the scope of a note such as this; and what has happened to haiku in the age of the internet, the cellphone and Twitter on its own would make a fascinating full-length essay by someone better versed than myself. Suffice to say that the picture is, as usual, more complicated than it first appears.

Interestingly, one of the essential ingredients of traditional haiku (alongside the presence of a *kigo*, or seasonal reference) is a quality known as *kiru*, which loosely translates as ‘cutting’. The idea is that the haiku poet cuts between two ideas, thereby recognising them as clear and distinct, but at the same – through the decisive energy of the transition – drawing attention to deeper connections between them. In *rensaku*, the linked sequence of haiku, this ‘cutting’ effect is intensified, and a modern reader, brought up on a diet of television and cinema, should be quite at home with a sequence of brief images, animated by a jump-cut technique that anticipates the editing suite by a couple of hundred years.

In writing *Waveforms*, I followed a generally chronological (that is seasonal) line throughout (an essential aspect of the tradition in most of its variations). However, on many occa-

sions I have trusted a given haiku’s position in the whole to speak for it, not wishing to introduce more ‘signposts’ than felt necessary. The sequence does not take place over a single day, or even over a single year, but a certain coherence is, I hope, achieved by those occasional temporal and seasonal references. Once established in any text, place and time continue to exert an influence until they are revised or re-rendered before the reader’s eye: it is the nature of human experience (and the human



experience of nature) than we read it as such.

Finally, when it came to the rhythm, I wanted something that was as close as possible to everyday speech, but also something that wouldn’t push against the haiku’s natural (to me) division into three lines and, usually, two linked images or ideas. After some experimentation I found that a predominantly trochaic (heavy-light / heavy-light ...) rather than iambic (light-heavy / light-heavy ...) metre was the most comfortable fit. I point this out here only because the iambic is often seen as the default measure of English verse, being the basis of, of course, the sonnet’s iambic pentametre, Shakespeare’s blank

verse, and so much more. It may be that the trochee works so well in the 17-syllable haiku because it makes the most of the opening and closing syllables of each line, giving them extra emphasis, and thereby helping to recreate some of the feel of that *kiru* or ‘cutting’ effect the form so much depends on.

MY ATTITUDE to haiku has changed considerably over the course of writing and compiling this volume. Though I have long read and admired haiku (and find it a wonder-

ful way of stepping outside of the sometimes overly complicated syntax of some other forms), in some ways it seemed to me too proscriptive, insisting that too much of what I might call ‘the noise of the world’ be excluded in the search for essence. Whatever worth this new work might have, it has opened again for me the small aperture of this venerable form, and shown me how haiku has yet the power to render a world I recognise in a way both accurate and suggestive, two ingredients necessary to any poetic form worth its salt.

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**Waves themselves, their wings
flashing silver when they turn
as one – the starlings.**

**Two boys with a kite
made from twigs and plastic bags.
Wind shrugs: “Oh, all right.”**

**Incredibly smooth,
morning’s newly washed-up stones –
like fresh eggs, or fruit.**

**As precise as words
on a page, in the fresh mud –
the language of birds.**

**The first drops of rain
strike the concrete bathing hut –
colour once again.**

**In his high-vis vest
the bicycle courier
pauses to reflect.**

**Let the day recur;
to the watercolourist
everything’s a blur.**

**Old man in his car
staring out to sea, Tosca
singing from the heart.**