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## ESSAYS

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### HAIKU AESTHETICS: A LOOK AT UNDERSTATEMENT<sup>1</sup>

*Susan Antolin*

In the fall of 2013 I accompanied Fay Aoyagi to a freshman haiku class taught by Dr. Steven Carter, a professor and chair of the Asian Languages department at Stanford University. Fay had been invited to read her work and discuss haiku, and I was just along for the ride, eager to hear Fay read and to observe the class. It was November, the academic term was well underway, and the students had by that time some familiarity with the history of haiku, with the work of a number of Japanese and English-language haiku poets, and were also in the process of writing haiku of their own. The discussion following Fay's reading focused on how she became interested in haiku (not through an admiration for the traditional Japanese masters) and where she finds inspiration for her unique, avant-garde style. As the class time came to a close, Dr. Carter posed questions regarding haiku aesthetics that were left mostly unanswered, and when the class dispersed, Fay, Dr. Carter, and I continued the discussion as we crossed the campus in the waning light of late afternoon.

Dr. Carter's questions were straightforward, yet difficult to answer. If the syllable count is not essential, and if minimalism alone does not define haiku, what aesthetic qualities are indispensable to haiku? Also, what, in terms of aesthetics, makes one haiku stand out over the rest and why? When we reached the parking lot and headed our separate ways, Dr. Carter said, not at all in an accusatory way, that we need to do a better job at talking about haiku aesthetics. That "we" seemed to include the whole haiku community rather than just the three of us standing there on the Stanford campus about to head off into rush hour traffic.

Dr. Carter's questions regarding haiku aesthetics remained with me over the next couple of years and were often on my mind, though in a casual way, as I selected poems for *Acorn*, a journal I edit. Early last year, when John Stevenson asked whether I might present something at that year's Haiku North America conference, I thought it might be a good opportunity to challenge myself to consider haiku aesthetics more seriously and see where I stand on the topic.

I began my research where one often begins, with a look at the dictionary. The term 'aesthetics,' it turns out, is not as easy to define as one might guess from the frequency with which it is used in conversation. The Oxford English Dictionary provides several definitions, the most applicable of which seems to be: "the philosophy or theory of taste or of the perception of the beautiful in nature and art." I found a slightly more accessible and useful definition in Donald Richie's book *A Tractate on Japanese Aesthetics* in which he wrote, "Aesthetics is that branch of philosophy defining beauty and the beautiful, how it can be recognized, ascertained, judged."<sup>2</sup>

As I read further about aesthetics, I was surprised to learn that the whole notion of aesthetics has been plagued with controversy nearly from the outset of its use in the eighteenth century. The very idea that a set of principles exists for evaluating art is not universally accepted.

In his book *Aesthetics*, Charles Taliaferro describes various outlandish examples of performance art and asks, "Can simply calling something 'art' make it art?"<sup>3</sup> To me, this invites the parallel question, can simply calling something "haiku" make it haiku? If the answer is no, then where do aesthetics come into play, if at all?

Over the years much has been written about haiku aesthetics, with scholars telling us that Zen Buddhism is the key to haiku; that Zen is not necessarily tied to haiku; that haiku must come from direct observation; that imagination can play a part; that haiku must have a vertical as well as a horizontal axis; that disjunction is where the true beauty lies; and on and on. Some writers describe haiku aesthetics by explaining the nuances of Japanese aesthetic terminology such as *wabi*, *sabi*, *makoto*, *karumi*, *yugen*, *mono no aware*, etc. However, now that more than fifty years have passed since the Beat Poets popularized haiku in America, we should be

at a point where haiku can comfortably find its place in the literary canon outside of Japan. For this to happen, it seems to me that we ought to be able to evaluate and discuss haiku poems in the language we use to write them. Using Japanese vocabulary to discuss haiku aesthetics, while interesting and in some ways useful, has the side effect of furthering the notion of haiku as an exotic art akin to the tea ceremony or flower arranging rather than a respected literary form. This is not to deny that the aesthetics of haiku did originate in Japan, but our ability to discuss those aesthetic principles should not be limited by our familiarity with the nuances of Japanese vocabulary.

As an editor, I read a lot of haiku. I am extremely fortunate to get regular submissions from some of the most experienced and talented poets writing in English today. I am also fortunate to get many submissions from complete novices, and I am often asked to provide feedback on submitted work. Of course, there are many different ways a poem can succeed and many different ways a poem can fail to reach its potential. Sometimes it is useful to focus on the particularities of each poem, suggesting changes in lineation or a word that seems off. Other times it seems more useful to step back and see whether there is a larger, aesthetic quality that is missing. And often there is.

It seems to me a worthwhile exercise for each of us to ask ourselves what aesthetic qualities stand out and feel indispensable to haiku. The exercise itself requires a gross oversimplification, but still I invite you to consider what aesthetic qualities you consider most essential as we look at the sample haiku that follow. Some of the possibilities might include: simplicity, immediacy, non-intellectuality, freshness, sincerity, lightness, spontaneity, effortlessness, compassion, surprise, mystery, open-endedness, reverence, focus, wonder, the beauty of disjunction, or even the thrill of disorientation.

For me, the aesthetic quality that stands out above the rest is *understatement*, by which I mean to include the related ideals of silence, restraint, subtlety, and suggestiveness. Understatement feels essential to haiku, not only to traditional style poems, but even to contemporary and experimental haiku as well. While understatement is an ordinary, easily understood term in English, it seems to me that it captures one of

the quintessentially Japanese aesthetic ideals. During the years I lived in Japan, I was struck by understatement in the muted colors and elegant patterns of clothing, the use of natural wood in architectural design, the subtle flavors of food, and even everyday communication (in which leaving out the subject of a sentence is perfectly normal). Bashō once said, “The works of other schools of poetry are like colored paintings; my disciples paint with black ink.” Now, evaluating what it is that appeals to me in English-language haiku, I find that same quality of understatement to be key.

In a recent interview published in *Frogpond*, the poet Kwame Dawes noted that the poetry establishment does not grant haiku a tremendous amount of respect, which is a concern I have often heard expressed by English-language haiku poets.<sup>4</sup> In light of that, I thought it might be interesting to gather commentary not only from the usual suspects (of haiku scholars) but also from a variety of writers who are firmly within the western poetry and prose establishment to show that the ideal of understatement is not all that exotic and is in fact valued by many outside the haiku community as well.

I’d like to look at some haiku—some traditional and some modern—to see various ways in which poets use understatement to create what I believe are excellent poems. In terms of craft, the most fundamental element of traditional haiku is the image. The use of specific images from everyday life is an inherently understated way to create a certain mood or convey some larger feeling. T. S. Eliot wrote that “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.”<sup>5</sup> William Carlos Williams famously spoke of “no ideas but in things.” Haiku fits exactly into this line of thought. With specific imagery and no space for explanation, understatement is nearly inevitable.

twilight  
staples rust  
in the telephone pole

*Alan Pizzarelli*<sup>6</sup>

the party over  
a forgotten glass  
in the summer rain

*Dietmar Tauchner*<sup>7</sup>

In drawing the reader's attention to the smallest, most insignificant of objects—rusting staples in a telephone pole or a glass left out in the rain—the sense of understatement and restraint is striking. Alan Watts said "... haiku poetry excels in one of the rarest of the artistic virtues, the virtue of knowing when to stop; of knowing when enough has been said."<sup>8</sup> When a haiku gets it just right, we have the sense that one more word might spoil everything.

Many haiku focus on the seemingly ordinary, but big, complicated topics such as love, pregnancy, and end-of-life decisions can also come into play through the effective use of understatement. By focusing, with restraint, on just a small detail, we sense the larger issue just as clearly, and often more powerfully, than had more words been used.

bearing down  
on a borrowed pen  
do not resuscitate

*Yu Chang*<sup>9</sup>

Louise Glück once wrote, "I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence. The unsaid, for me, exerts great power: often I wish an entire poem could be made in this vocabulary. It is analogous to the unseen for example, to the power of ruins, to works of art either damaged or incomplete. Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied .... It seems to me that what is wanted, in art, is to harness the power of the unfinished."<sup>10</sup>

unplanned pregnancy  
 the hum of a beehive  
 beneath the porch

*John McManus*<sup>11</sup>

We know there is a backstory, that what we have is only a part of a much larger whole, but leaving the picture incomplete, leaving so much unsaid, is where the power of the haiku resides. In *Death in the Afternoon*, Ernest Hemingway put it this way, “If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water.”<sup>12</sup> If the theory of one-eighth of the iceberg being above water applies to prose, then certainly an even smaller fraction of the iceberg can be above water in effective haiku when the poet has given us just the right words. In her book *Ten Windows*, Jane Hirshfield wrote, “Most good poems hold some part of their thoughts in invisible ink .... The unexpressed can at times affect the reader more strongly than what is explicit, precisely because it has not been narrowed by conscious accounting.”<sup>13</sup>

first date —  
 the little pile  
 of anchovies

*Roberta Beary*<sup>14</sup>

One of the primary techniques for achieving understatement in haiku is through juxtaposition, the placing of (generally) two images in a poem without interpretation. In *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*, Lee Gurga wrote, “A space is created between the images in which the reader's emotions or understanding can lodge and grow. How these images relate to one another is a matter of some delicacy. The relationship cannot be too obvious or the poem will be trite, but if it is too distant the association of images

will appear forced or arbitrary.”<sup>15</sup> Effective juxtaposition, because it supplies no explanation or interpretation, is a technique of understatement. The relationship between the parts of the haiku is left for the reader to discover on her own.

nesting birds  
I carry chemo-shed hair  
to the garden

my white lie —  
long grass longer  
by a damselfly-length

*D. Claire Gallagher*<sup>16</sup>

*Carolyn Hall*<sup>17</sup>

Another hallmark of great haiku and one that adds to the aesthetic of understatement is the use of plain, unadorned language. In his book *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics*, Paul O. Williams wrote, “...haiku is not in-your-face poetry. It does not gush words, and it tends to avoid such rich, or, one might even say, fudgy ones. And it vanishes like elves and mice when shouting arrives.... And yet, like some shy persons, it carries considerable power at times, and occasionally, great power. Often it is the power of a whisper saying remarkable things, things easily elusive if one is not paying attention.”<sup>18</sup> The preference for plain words over “fudgy” ones echoes what Bashō may have meant when he said, “Prefer vegetable broth to duck soup.”

barefoot  
the earth  
pushes back

*Bill Kenney*<sup>19</sup>

That this poem subtly makes me contemplate the smallness of my existence on the planet feels surprising and all the more powerful in light of the plain, spare language.

Hand in hand with the notion of plain language is Anton Chechov’s ideal of writing ‘colder’ in order to get at greater emotion. Note that writing ‘colder’ does not mean adopting a purely objective viewpoint,

something I have heard advocated for in haiku. Objective haiku that do not suggest emotion are, quite frankly, boring. Instead, using plain, stark language and a matter-of-fact tone, can give haiku a sense of authenticity and contrasts powerfully with subjects that might in other contexts feel trite or sentimental.

her	the sack of kittens
being	sinking in the icy creek
dead	increases the cold
goes	
on	<i>Nick Virgilio</i> <sup>21</sup>

*John Stevenson*<sup>20</sup>

Using language that does not draw attention to itself is key to the understated poem and allows the reader to experience the moment almost as though the words themselves were invisible. In an unpublished lecture in 1933, T. S. Eliot said his aim was to “write poetry which should be essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones, or poetry so transparent that we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry ...”<sup>22</sup>

Christmas alone  
the streetlight  
starts to snow

*Robert Davey*<sup>23</sup>

Many excellent haiku include elements of the surreal or imaginary subjects while still achieving the aesthetic of understatement. André Breton, considered the father of surrealism, wrote that “Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association heretofore neglected, in the omnipotence of the dream, and in the disinterested play of thought.”<sup>24</sup> That spirit of playfulness and inclusion of the imaginary can result in haiku that are understated by virtue of the plain language in



which they are written as well as the mental gap between the real world and the imagined one they present with a gentle, not showy, touch.

black south wind  
a pirate ship  
coming for me

*Fay Aoyagi*<sup>25</sup>

empty park  
two crows start  
the world over

*Robert Epstein*<sup>26</sup>

whale song  
i become  
an empty boat

*Michelle Tennison*<sup>27</sup>

Occasionally haiku use allusion and surrealism while maintaining a suggestive, understated tone. The following haiku, which seems to allude to the myth of Daphne and Apollo (in which Daphne was transformed into a tree just as Apollo tried to embrace her), is a stunning example of just such a poem.

“Do you want me?”  
she whispers, and turns  
to leaves

*David McCann*<sup>28</sup>

In recent years there has been a lot of talk about the so-called *gendai* haiku movement. The widespread use of the term *gendai* is a good example of the way in which confusion can surround the meaning of Japanese words. *Gendai* translates to “the present age,” “modern,” and “of our own time.” In Japan in the 1930s some haiku poets began to write in a more experimental style, which became known as *gendai* haiku. Outside of Japan an avant-garde haiku style has caught on more recently that seems to embrace language-based poetry, the ultra-modern, and the experimental,

and I often hear poets question if these haiku belong in the Japanese *gendai* category. Surrealism is often present in avant-garde haiku, although I believe it is not required. The language of these poems is sometimes opaque and can veer at times into the nonsensical. How do we evaluate these new haiku? Do we place value on poems simply for pushing the boundaries? Is newness valued for its own sake? Is the hyper-intellectualism of some avant-garde poems antithetical to the spirit of haiku? What about show-offy poems? Can they really be included in what we recognize as haiku? To me, the guiding principle of understatement can apply just as well to avant-garde haiku as to any other type of haiku. Even very experimental poems can retain a suggestive tone that, to me, is just as appealing as the suggestiveness in traditional haiku.

sore to the touch his name in my mouth

*Eve Luckring*<sup>29</sup>

Luckring's choice of words feels exactly right and yet the poem evades definite interpretation. There are hints of a backstory, but the understated quality of the poem makes the emotion conveyed feel raw and powerful.

this morning  
it takes the iris to open  
forever

*Michele Root-Bernstein*<sup>30</sup>

There is a subtle shift in the above poem from what we expect (“it takes the iris forever to open”) and the possible meaning of the words in the unexpected order we have them. A well-done understated poem often has an openness, as this one does, to various interpretations.

Experimentation with lineation and missing words can lend a musical quality akin to missed beat syncopation, giving a jazz-like feel to haiku, as in the following poem. The empty spaces hint at missing words, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps.



reading journal submissions, I sometimes can almost feel a poet wringing the life out of a poem trying so hard to make a perfect haiku. I might be guilty of that at times myself. At those moments, we need to release our hands from around the poem's throat, take a step back, and breathe. Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote "Let the readers do some of the work themselves." Knowing how much work to leave for the reader is, where the art comes in. Understatement, when done just right, is what makes me catch my breath when I read a great haiku, and allows me to find something more each time I return. For me, it is also the thread that connects traditional, image-based poems to experimental haiku and makes them feel as though they are siblings rather than strangers. And, finally, while understatement is valued in many other forms of writing, nothing harnesses the power of understatement in quite as stark and powerful a way as haiku.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay was delivered at Haiku North America 2015, Schenectady, NY: 14 October, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Richie, Donald. *A Tractate on Japanese Aesthetics*. Berkeley, Calif.: Stone Bridge Press, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Taliaferro, Charles. *Aesthetics*. United Kingdom: Oneworld, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Black, Rick. "Nick Virgilio, Walt Whitman, and the American Poetic Tradition: An Interview with Kwame Dawes." *Frogpond* 38.1 (Winter 2015)

<sup>5</sup> Eliot, T.S. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> Pizzarelli, Alan. *The Canary Funeral*. Bloomfield, N.J.: House of Haiku Books, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Tauchner, Dietmar. *Acorn* #21 (Fall 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Watts, Alan. From an essay "Haiku" he read on KPFA in Berkeley around 1958.

<sup>9</sup> Chang, Yu. *Seeds*. Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Glück, Louise. *Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry*. Hopewell, N.J.: The Ecco Press, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> McManus, John. *Acorn* 35 (Fall 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Hemingway, Ernest. *Death in the Afternoon*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.

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- <sup>13</sup> Hirshfield, Jane. *Ten Windows*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015.
- <sup>14</sup> Beary, Roberta. *The Unworn Necklace*. United Kingdom: Snapshot Press, 2007.
- <sup>15</sup> Gurga, Lee. *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*. Lincoln, Il.: Modern Haiku Press, 2003.
- <sup>16</sup> Gallagher, D. Claire. *Acorn* #21 (Fall 2008).
- <sup>17</sup> Hall, Carolyn. *Water Lines*. United Kingdom: Snapshot Press, 2006.
- <sup>18</sup> Williams, Paul O. *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics*. Lee Gurga and Michael Dylan Welch, ed. Foster City, CA: Press Here, 2001.
- <sup>19</sup> Kenney, Bill. *Acorn* #21 (Fall 2008).
- <sup>20</sup> Stevenson, John. *Acorn* #29 (Fall 2012).
- <sup>21</sup> Black, Rick, ed. *Nick Virgilio: A Life in Haiku*. Arlington, Va.: Turtle Light Press, 2012.
- <sup>22</sup> Eliot, T.S. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*.
- <sup>23</sup> Davey, Robert. *Acorn* #30 (Spring 2013).
- <sup>24</sup> Breton, André. In "A Brief Guide to Surrealism." Poets.org. <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/brief-guide-surrealism>. Accessed June 4, 2016.
- <sup>25</sup> Aoyagi, Fay. *Acorn* #31 (Fall 2013).
- <sup>26</sup> Epstein, Robert. *Acorn* #33 (Fall 2014).
- <sup>27</sup> Tennison, Michelle. *Acorn* #32 (Spring 2014)
- <sup>28</sup> McCann, David. *Acorn* #32 (Spring 2014).
- <sup>29</sup> Luckring, Eve. *Modern Haiku* 42.3 (Autumn 2011)
- <sup>30</sup> Root-Bernstein, Michele. *Acorn* #31 (Fall 2013)
- <sup>31</sup> Gurga, Lee and Scott Metz, ed. *Haiku 21*. Lincoln, Il.: Modern Haiku Press, 2011.
- <sup>32</sup> Smith, Tracy K. "Wipe that Smirk off Your Poem" *New York Times*: March 16, 2015.
- <sup>33</sup> Komunyakaa, Yusef. *Best American Poetry*. New York: Scribner Poetry, 2003.