
ESSAYS

HIPPOPOTOMONSTROSESQUIPEDALIOPHOBIA¹

Brad Bennett

We haiku poets generally eschew using long, ponderous words in our concise poems. Face it, we are scared of extra-long words. And rightly so. Haiku is *the* short form, so why use up so much space with one word? An extra-long word in a haiku is like a star baseball player taking up a significant portion of the team's payroll—it seldom results in a championship. Plus, the use of long words is undemocratic—all of the words in a haiku should share the power. Extra-long words call attention to themselves, and by using these cumbersome words, authors call attention to themselves as well. Ultimately, a haiku is about accessibility and readability. Long words often lead us out of the concrete sensory forest in which many haiku poets love to walk.

But every now and then, a really long word works in haiku, and it works wonderfully. This occurs for a handful of reasons. Sometimes, extra-long words work visually in a haiku, either because they are deliberately long, or because they are designed to create a concrete poem-like effect. Occasionally they work auditorily, creating instances of onomatopoeia. Multi-syllabic words are also used intentionally to create humor in ironic haiku, senryu, and joke-ku. Finally, long words can be effective because they present the most apt word for that particular sensory experience, concept, or emotion. In some cases, the poet actually conjures up a specific word to fit a specific need. Ultimately, if an extra-long word does succeed in a haiku, I would argue that it must contribute to the poem specifically because of its length. An extra-long word has to serve an additional purpose besides contributing to the denotative meaning of the poem.

This essay is not meant to be an exhaustive study of all the really long words used in haiku—that would be an impossible task. My mission is more exploratory, an attempt to start a conversation. A first question

might be: How long is “really long?” In looking at numerous haiku I discovered that five-syllable words are not uncommon in haiku, and, most of the time, they are digested by readers who don’t even stop to think about how many syllables they contain. There are even some common six-syllable words that we race through while reading them without noticing how long they are. One such word is “familiarity.” The following poem displays how easily this word goes down.

each day
the familiarity
of water

*Jeannie Martin*²

This is a thoughtful, observant, and successful haiku, but the length of the word “familiarity” doesn’t add extra value to the poem. Haiku that include words that are long but unostentatious like this are not the focus of this article. Instead, I will be examining haiku with words that are mostly six or more syllables long and exceptional in some important way. In his article, “Haiku Diction: The Use of Words in Haiku,” Charles Trumbull states, “Haiku poets strive for precision of meaning and appropriateness of diction. Wordplay or any other use of a word that calls attention to the word itself or away from the meaning of the haiku is discouraged. Words must be used as gently as possible so as to minimize perturbations of the image.”³ I would argue that the extra-long words that are used in the following haiku do not perturb the image—rather they enhance and enlighten the poem.

Perhaps the most obvious way an extra-long word can contribute to a haiku is by alluding to a long physical distance or a long period of elapsed time. One of the first and only times that I have used a six-syllable word in a haiku was in this one:

octogenarian swimmer his long, long wake⁴

My choice of “octogenarian” was deliberate. I chose the long word to mimic the long wake of the long-lived swimmer. If I had used “eighty-year old,” I would argue that the poem wouldn’t have been as effective.

Using a long and bulky word in a poem can force the reader to slow down, even when they are reading the word in their head. In the following poem, navigating the word “circumnavigation” deliberately slows the reader to a snail’s pace.

takes all day
snail’s circumnavigation
of a stone

*Jeannie Martin*⁵

In the next poem, the long word “bioluminescence” lingers like summer dusk.

the jellyfish
and their bioluminescence
a long summer dusk

*Melissa Allen*⁶

Sometimes a long word reflects an act of slow, deliberate rumination:

philosophizing—
putting my foot in the stream
a second time

*Jim Kacian*⁷

Although “philosophizing” has “only” five syllables, I would argue that it fits my definition of a ponderous, extra-long word. Kacian starts the reader off in their head with that word. Then he and Heraclitus invite us to get our feet wet through real world experimentation.

summer clouds
she talks about death
hypothetically

*Collin Barber*⁸

Barber's haiku works contrary to Kacian's, in that the long word ends rather than begins the poem. Thus, the reader has to slow down and reflect at the end of the poem, just as the person in the poem ponders death while the empirical (and metaphorical) summer clouds float by.

Another visual effect created by extra-long words is reminiscent of concrete poems. Long pseudo-words can be created by jamming smaller words together, as in this classic by John Stevenson:⁹

jampackedelevetaoreverybuttonpushed

You could argue that this is a concrete haiku, because the words are crowded together to mimic the experience. In the following poem, the smushing of the words (trial, lengthy, hypotheticals, strain, and nerves) helps to create the stress and strain of the trial experience.

trialengthypotheticalstrainerves

*Emily Romano*¹⁰

Sometimes, the sound of the word contributes to the sound of the poem, serving as a form of onomatopoeia:

tintinnabulation—
shadow puppets dance
across a blank white wall

*Angelee Deodhar*¹¹

The word "tintinnabulation" acts as musical accompaniment to the puppet show and the poem. Plus, the word dances lightly across the first line.

mountain brook—
the indistinguishable spring
of voices

*Tom Clausen*¹²

In this poem, the word “indistinguishable” sounds like a loud mash-up of babbling and trickling sounds, the cascading of a mountain brook.

Every now and then, it’s hard to avoid the temptation of ironic fun that can be achieved by deliberately counting syllables. Jim Kacian says he wrote this one as “a ‘guidepost’ for syllable-counters.”¹³

ordinary things
extraordinarily
articulated¹⁴

In the following poem, “irregularities” is a word used to describe specific parts of a paper that don’t follow some unstated norms or rules. The word “irregularity” is an irregular word in a haiku, thus calling attention to itself deliberately and ironically.

first draft
the irregularities
in the paper

*Jim Kacian*¹⁵

I’m sure we’ve all seen joke haiku that include multi-syllabic words like this one:

Long words have ruined
The best lines of my haiku.
Sesquipedalian.

*Rob Shore*¹⁶

Charles Trumbull describes some arcane words in haiku as “high-falootin’ talk.” He states, “In such cases I always have the impression that the poet is trying to advertise that he/she knows more words than I do—i.e., showing off. Again, the point of writing a haiku is to communicate. If it does not do so because one word or another is unfamiliar, I have to adjudge a failed haiku.”¹⁷

Some long words in haiku may be too technical or obscure, and thus send the reader to the nearest dictionary. I know a haiku poet who delightedly admits to using words that people need to look up. For me, the form is historically, deliberately, and mindfully accessible, so I try to use conversational, familiar language. I don't want my readers to look up words from my poems, unless there's a very, very good reason.

When I am considering using a word that might not be universally known, I try to guess whether "most" readers would know the meaning. The problem with this strategy is that I don't always know whether a word is common enough for a majority of readers to know its meaning. And what constitutes a majority? The just-a-little-over-a-half of 51%? The 75% that it takes for baseball players to get into the Hall of Fame? The 90% that an A Grade needs?

Gary Hotham states, "I think the haiku form especially favors short words, common words that build but don't distract from the goal. It is possible that a word that might send a reader to the dictionary is the best one to use or that an unusual or uncommon one like 'tinnabulation' is most appropriate. On the whole I don't want a distraction from the flow."¹⁸

Occasionally, I come upon an unfamiliar word that I need to look up and become richer for the experience. And perhaps those of us who are ensconced in, or nearing, the last third of our lives can be forgiven if we need to look up words that we used to know.

climate change
 what will dendrochronology
 say about us?

*Alan S. Bridges*¹⁹

Sometimes, a word may not be familiar at first, but you can decipher the meaning by the context. Consider the following haiku:

bringing soft things
 into the hibernaculum
 solstice sky

*Julie Warther*²⁰

Upon first reading, I didn't know the word "hibernaculum," but could guess at its meaning. It starts with the same root that begins the word "hibernate." And I pictured a hibernaculum as a smaller version of a domed planetarium, so I made the connection with the solstice sky. Thus, "hibernaculum" adds significantly more to this poem than words like "den" or "lair." Ultimately, this extra-long word was accessible via a minimum of effort, even though I didn't initially know its meaning.

A long word in a poem can be the author's invention. (Although the word in question in the following haiku contains only five syllables, I would argue that it is bulky enough to make our cut.)

your patience the real me michelangeloed

*Julie Warther*²¹

This haiku works because the noun (Michelangelo) gets transformed into a verb with a specific meaning that can only be expressed using that newly-coined word. Wikipedia gifted me the word for this phenomenon, anthimeria, which means using one part of speech for another. It seems that we are verbing our nouns more and more frequently these days, so we may see more of these showing up in haiku in the future.

We are all searching for the absolutely perfect word to describe each haiku experience, and sometimes we find that only that one word will do, even if it runs long. "Photosynthesizing" is a unique and complex process, so the complexity of the word works in this poem about the magic of touch:

photosynthesizing the newness of each touch

*Julie Warther*²²

Yes, we want to use extra-long words judiciously and sparingly in our haiku. And yes, we should avoid using hippopotomonstrosesquipedalian words in haiku almost all of the time. But there are rare instances where they succeed, for a variety of reasons. Perhaps you might try using one yourself!

NOTES

¹The title of this article means “fear of long words” and appears to have more than one spelling. I chose the one I liked best! The author wishes to thank Alan S. Bridges, Tom Clausen, Gary Hotham, Jim Kacian, Hannah Mahoney, Jeannie Martin, John Stevenson, and Julie Warther for their help with this article. Also, many thanks to Charlie Trumbull for his help in tracking down haiku with extra-long words.

² Previously unpublished.

³ Trumbull, Charles. “Haiku Diction: The Use of Words in Haiku.” *Frogpond* 38.2 (2015).

⁴ *failed haiku*, February 2017.

⁵ Previously unpublished.

⁶ *Red Dragonfly* (blog), Sept. 1, 2013.

⁷ *Woodnotes* 29.

⁸ *The Heron’s Nest* 8.3.

⁹ *Frogpond* 25.2.

¹⁰ *Modern Haiku* 27:1.

¹¹ “Mindfulness” (haibun), *Kernals* 2, Summer 2013.

¹² *Mayfly* 27.

¹³ Email correspondence.

¹⁴ Previously unpublished.

¹⁵ Previously unpublished.

¹⁶ Best American Poetry website, August 5, 2008.

¹⁷ Trumbull. *Frogpond* 38.2.

¹⁸ Hotham, Gary. “Short Word Prejudice.” *Spilled Milk: Haiku Destinies*. Colorado: Pinyon Publishing, 2010, p. 131.

¹⁹ Previously unpublished.

²⁰ *Hedgerow* 126.

²¹ *Sonic Boom* 14.

²² *FemkuMag* 5.