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## ESSAYS

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### BILL PAULY'S HAIKU JOURNEY: EXPERIMENTATION, CRAFT, AND HEARTFELT INTUITION

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As an undergraduate student at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, before I discovered haiku, I was immersed in modernist and contemporary poetry. My honors thesis was on Western traditions of the short poem: comparing the ability of Greek lyric poetry to convey emotional intensity with the epigram, which more typically conveys witty satire. When I graduated in 1975, I won the student writing award and immediately took my prize money to the bookstore where I bought collections of poetry, including two anthologies of haiku: *The Haiku Anthology* edited by Cor van den Heuvel, and *Modern Japanese Haiku* translated and edited by Makoto Ueda. I also bought an anthology of visual poetry, *Concrete Poetry: A World View* edited by Mary Ellen Solt. These books were formative in my conception of modern haiku and possible experimentation in poetry. I was fascinated with these contemporary haiku and the variety of approaches to writing haiku represented in these two anthologies. I realized that the haiku tradition was a vibrant, living literary tradition with a wide range of authors exploring the possibilities of the art for our own times. I started writing haiku in my journal that summer after graduation and have continued ever since. A year later I was fortunate to study Japanese literature with Dr. Sanford Goldstein at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana and joined a group of students and poets interested in writing and translating haiku and tanka in English. In 1976, with my wife as co-editor, we started publishing *High/Coo: A Quarterly of Short Poetry*.

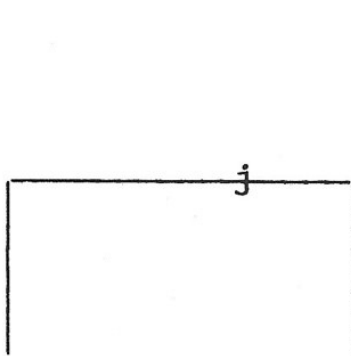
It was our pleasure to first become acquainted with Bill Pauly and his creative literary art not long after we started publishing *High/Coo*.

In addition to appearing in early issues of the journal, Pauly submitted a manuscript for a chapbook collection, *Wind the Clock by Bittersweet*, which we gladly published in 1977 as the second chapbook in our series. His chapbook was organized into two sections. The first featured his concrete haiku (which he called “eyeku”), including his well-known “cat on a fence” haiku. The second half featured haiku with several employing concrete poetry visual effects through careful arrangement of lines, words, and letters. We were glad to publish this outstanding collection as an example of experimentation, playful arrangement, and a variety of poetic devices in contemporary English haiku. This was a perfect example of our poetic goals to celebrate ongoing experiments that expand the conception of haiku beyond the idea of it being a closed form following a rigid syllable count. We were interested in haiku, tanka, and senryu that explored a wide range of the human condition beyond typical Japanese seasonal images and tropes.

This essay is a reader-response review of Bill Pauly’s lifelong journey into the literary art of writing haiku. I want to acknowledge that this review has been influenced by many of my former students and participants in workshops I have led on his haiku. We will follow a loose chronology of his experiments with haiku, eyeku, and senryu based on the recently published collection, *Walking Uneven Ground: Selected Haiku of Bill Pauly*. We will pause along the way to admire many of the award-winning gems he left behind. Pauly employed a variety of poetic techniques including visual arrangement, careful enjambment, euphony of phrasing, careful crafting of word choice and figurative language, and significant sharing of heartfelt emotions. He did not shirk away from the depths of human experience, including emotions of desire, regret, penance, doubt, as well as significant loss.

Bill Pauly, as a former student, protégé, and colleague of Raymond Roseliep, embraced creative exploration of the possibilities of haiku and senryu throughout his life. He was one of the young writers in the late 1970’s following Roseliep’s call to create “This Haiku of Ours” that can “express our own culture, our own spirit, our own enlightened experience, putting to service the riches of our land and language, summoning the dexterity of Western writing tools.”<sup>1</sup> Roseliep’s essay, published in *Bonsai*

magazine in 1976, discusses several means of experimentation with haiku employing figures of speech, enjambment, broad new content areas, narrative voices, idioms, first person perspective, and playful arrangement of lines and words on the page. He cites examples of several effective experiments, including Pauly's "concrete-haiku" of a cat crouched on a fence:



Take a moment to imagine this concrete haiku. Things appear static at first, then we start connecting the various pieces into a coherent scene. We have juxtaposition of the bird flying high overhead and the cat on a fence. Do they see each other? William J. Higginson noted the "new poets and innovations" from High/Coo Press in the late 1970s in his book, *The Haiku Handbook*. He included this poem as an example of "concrete haiku, so-called in which the typewriter becomes the tool of a visual artist, divorced from words completely. Do you see the twitch in the tail of the cat on a fence?"<sup>2</sup> Here is how Roseliep discusses it in his essay: "I hear and see those teeth chattering, that tail swishing, and the flapping wings overhead moving perfectly safe and happy into the sky's free space. The poem also dramatizes human temptation." Whether you imagine this as a peaceful moment or battle of predators is up to you.

as  
we move  
the mountain<sup>3</sup>

Consider this haiku from the second half of *Wind the Clock by Bittersweet*. Pauly has carefully arranged the haiku into the shape of a mountain. However, as we read and imagine this haiku, there is much more than the shape itself. The haiku calls us into a social group as "we move"

to the mountain or with the mountain. The mountain is not a fixed thing, standing in place. As we move ... the mountain moves. It is vibrant. Alive. Like us. The haiku is not merely about a contrast of “we move” with the mountain which doesn’t. As we move closer, the mountain seems to move as well, growing larger, closer, or perhaps, more distant. We move the mountain itself and/or become part of it. This is not about agency or power but rather connection and unity of us and the mountain. We love the lyrical simplicity of this haiku and how it calls us to be participants in the scene. This haiku is written with a simple conversational tone yet invites us to imagine a depth of insight and awe. If you stay with this haiku long enough, it might just move you.

so much silverware  
 so much silence  
 for two <sup>4</sup>

When we read this haiku out loud, we are surprised that a haiku on silence is so noisy. Can you hear the silverware being set around the table? It must be a formal occasion. But what we hear is the hush, hush, hush with the sibilant s’s and the uch uch sounds in the repetition of “so much” and again “so much.” While the narrator seems to assert that there is an abundance with those double “so much” phrases, the poem is actually about what’s missing. There are the riches of silverware but also “so much silence” suggesting that this is not a boisterous gathering of friends and family. The last line, with just two words, completes the scene as a couple of friends or perhaps a romantic couple. They are here for this formal dinner, but they have nothing to say. There’s an abundance of silence. An awkward quiet to endure. This should be a time for joyous celebration, with so much to say. But it’s not.

night forest  
 a web breaks  
 across her face <sup>5</sup>

With a simple use of third person perspective, this haiku features a couple who are out in the “night forest” which may or may not be a frightening

place. Maybe this adventure into the forest at night is common for one of the people but not the other. The narrator notices the reaction when “a web breaks / across her face.” As readers, how do we imagine her reaction? I can see her jerking away and wiping her face off with her hands. She is not thrilled to be out here in the forest at night. It is foreboding. Scary. I imagine that our haiku narrator has been in this situation before and finds it slightly humorous. He was genuinely trying to share his nature night walk with her but realizes that she is not finding the adventure rewarding. The spider is probably not thrilled about having its web destroyed either. With a symbolic reading, this haiku represents someone dealing with trauma. The night forest represents a scary unknown, and the woman is facing her fears. The breaking of the web is both a restraint and a symbolic “break through,” knowing she will not be held back despite the darkness of the night forest.

moon  
on  
no  
one<sup>6</sup>

This haiku won the first of many Henderson Haiku Awards Pauly received from the Haiku Society of America. Look at this haiku for a while and see how it takes shape in your imagination. Employing his eyeku strategies, Bill deliberately lined up those o’s. What do you see? What do you make of all those round m’s, n’s, and o’s? Do you see the movement of the moonlight down onto a lake? Do you see the mirrored reversal of “on” into “no” in the middle lines? And why does it end with “one”? Is the moon on everyone, not just one? Or is nobody there? It is beautiful even if no one is there to see it? Although we had someone on the moon a few years earlier in 1969, there is still mystery and beauty and magic in the moon. Throughout his journals and notecards and published haiku, it is evident that Pauly enjoyed playing with the arrangement of words, lines, pauses, and breaks for maximum effect. With my students I call this “moving the furniture” around until everything is just where it needs to be. Pauly was a master at the interior design of his haiku.

old calendar wrapping the fish heads in March <sup>7</sup>

Several haiku writers were exploring the use of one-line haiku, now called monoku, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Roger Clarence Matsuo-Allard published a small magazine of one-line haiku, *Sun-Lotus Haiku*, and several journals such as *Wind Chimes* and *Cicada* often featured one-line haiku by Pauly, Marlene Mountain, Bob Boldman, and others.

Consider how we read this one-line haiku by Pauly. There is probably a slight pause after “old calendar” but not much with the main action coming immediately after that fragment. The phrase is “wrapping the fish heads in March.” Overall, I imagine a scene of a fisherman who has just cleaned the day’s catch. It was a successful day of fishing, and now he is cleaning up the mess. It’s about taking care of things in due time. He doesn’t want to just leave the fish heads, so he wraps them up in a page from an old calendar. In March. A month from the calendar but also, perhaps, the time of renewal. The March calendar page connects us back to the beginning of the haiku. Everything is held within the calendar. The time of year suggests that the fish are biting again, and the fisherman will be planting his garden before long. Fish heads make for good fertilizer. This is ultimately a haiku about someone who takes care—not to litter, not to leave a mess for others to clean, not to waste the possible dirt renewing fertility in the dead fish heads. I think this one-line haiku wraps things up very well.

hummingbird  
is/is  
not moving <sup>8</sup>

This haiku plays with sound and visual arrangement to represent an encounter with a hummingbird. It’s fun to read this one out loud in different ways to speed up or slow down the buzz of the hummingbird. Various readings change the significance of “is not moving” versus “is moving” making both readings simultaneously true. Is the hummingbird a noun ... a being? Or is it a verb ... a moving? Visually, we get a zigzag shaped poem or a visual representation of a pair of wings around a buzzing center. It comes and goes in a second.

Old woman,  
rain in the eye  
of her needle<sup>9</sup>

Another Henderson Haiku award poem, this haiku asks us to imagine this old woman trying to thread a needle. She used to be able to do this without a second thought, but now the eye is harder to get through. There's rain in the eye of her needle. Tears? Challenges? Years of struggle? Life is not as easy as it used to be. She is an old woman with a capital O. Why does Pauly use a capital O in this haiku when he rarely uses capital letters in any other haiku? Is this the "eyeku" visual element coming into this poem? She has chosen a needle with the biggest possible eye and it is still hard to thread because she can't see through the rain. Would someone please thread this old woman's needle so she can get on with her life? The literal, symbolic, visual, and nursery-rhyme euphony of this haiku come together into a poem of compassion.

milkweed pod ...  
swish of her nightsilk  
falling<sup>10</sup>

About every five to ten years the haiku community publishes an anthology of erotic haiku. This haiku was published in one of the best, *Erotic Haiku*, edited by Rod Willmot. This haiku was one of the standouts of this collection with its interesting mix of sensory images. We can see the milkweed pod and imagine the seeds floating away. Or we can touch the milkweed pod and feel the silky smoothness inside the rough outer casing. It is, of course, the holder of the seeds that will spread future generations of milkweed wherever they fall. But that is just the first two words. The second part of the haiku switches contexts to lovers. We hear the "swish of her nightsilk" which must be a very quiet, nearly silent sound. No one is saying anything. There is an intensity of silence and heightened awareness to hear such a slight swish. Swish also suggests movement, which is visual. The swish comes from "her nightsilk / falling" so we join the narrator in noticing the graceful falling of this gown. The silk gown is soft to

touch, but this haiku is about the anticipation of releasing the coverings, the outer shells so that the lovers can be intensely, intimately, together. What is happening outdoors with the milkweed pod is also happening, in our human way, inside. There is such hope in the released seed.

heart drawn in dust  
by the old Indian ...  
rain <sup>11</sup>

This well-known haiku about the “heart drawn in dust” was another Henderson Haiku award winner. The opening phrase sounds like a ritual and evokes a midwestern drought. Everyone is hoping for rain. The old Indian does something about it, something he learned from his ancestors perhaps. He cares for the earth. Wants it to be healthy. To be full of life. With an eye to the visual, Pauly places the three dots after the opening phrase. Are these drops of rain? The last line with just the word “rain” has been moved closer to the three dots of the previous ellipsis suggesting that they do represent the first drops of rain. The old Indian still has his shaman magic touch!

sound of her voice  
carrying eggs  
across the ice <sup>12</sup>

In this award-winning haiku, the main character can barely be seen. We know she is there by the “sound of her voice” as she comes “across the ice.” I imagine that this ice is literally a creek or pond. There has been a heavy storm with snow and ice everywhere. She has to be careful “carrying the eggs” so she won’t fall and break them. They are her precious treasure. Food. Sustenance. The future. She reaches out with her voice to let us know she is on the way. To let us know that she is okay. We can barely make out her shape through the snow. We can barely hear her voice. Is this a figment of imagination? Is she really there? One of my students suggested that this is about a dream. She is trying to get through this treacherous storm, crossing a river or lake (everything is bigger in a

dream), and is crying out for help. She is vulnerable and scared. She is carrying the eggs of future generations of children not yet born. A more literal reader says that it's just ice across the yard and she is coming from the chicken house with the eggs. She assures her son or husband that everything's okay. Breakfast will be there soon.

seventh day of rain ...  
trying to remember  
the names of things <sup>13</sup>

This haiku takes on a religious tone. God created the earth and heavens and on the seventh day rested. It was a time for naming things. Well, in this haiku the rain continues on. The narrator has been cooped up inside for seven days. It's dark outside. When will the rain stop? Depressing. He's been down so long he can't even "remember / the names of things." For a poet, losing the ability to be a namer, a creator of words for the things around us, is the worst possible state of being. This is the opposite of having "the sun in his belly," which was the title of his teacher Raymond Roseliep's chapbook from High/Coo Press.

snowmelt ...  
she enters  
the earth on her knees <sup>14</sup>

This is Pauly's most well-known, award-winning haiku. It won the Henderson Haiku award in 1991 and was included in ten English-language haiku anthologies. On the surface this haiku appears to be an image of someone on their knees, praying. It is springtime. The snow is melting. Spring is on its way. And yet, there seems to be more. Mother Earth is receiving the snow melt and the supplicant and their hopes. This is a time of renewal. A student of mine, Melanie Hayes, asked Pauly about the origin of this haiku. He said: "This was a real 'haiku moment' for me. I was in my garden in early spring, probably getting ready to plant my Good Friday potatoes (a ritual among some old people around here). I was literally on my knees digging in the ground during a time of snow-

melt, so things were pretty cool and damp and muddy. The moment was a long one, but the gist of it was that I felt very connected with the earth, literally, by having ‘entered’ it on my knees. The fascinating world of spring rebirth was palpable to me. I, by the way, am the ‘she’ of the poem, a persona I sometimes allow myself as homage to my androgyny, my feminine side, which was very alive that day.”<sup>15</sup>

country field —  
home run rolling  
past the headstones<sup>16</sup>

In his *Baseball Haiku* anthology, Cor van den Heuvel noted that Pauly “had a happy childhood, able to play outdoors a lot, wandering alone or with his three brothers through meadows and along meandering creeks.”<sup>17</sup> The haiku features a “country field” where boys gather to play ball. The immediate focus of attention is a “home run rolling.” We are in the middle of the action. The batter is running around the bases, perhaps a bit too triumphantly. The opposing team is sighing, oh no! Meanwhile the “home run” is “rolling / past the headstones” in a cemetery. The home run connects the present generation of baseball players with those from the past, who in their own youth played baseball on that very same field. Just as we experienced the stillness and movement of the mountain in the second haiku discussed, the headstones are a significant contrast of stillness and movement in this poem.

brushing mushrooms  
the musty  
smell of her truth<sup>18</sup>

This is an interesting haiku that plays with sounds, smells, and a surprising synesthesia. Can you hear the brush brush brush sound of cleaning dirt off the mushrooms? Three of the first four words have an “ush” sound. We can smell the dirt coming off the mushrooms. They are tender. We have to brush them carefully in order to clean them without bruising or damaging them. This is a haiku about vulnerability. The last line is the

synesthesia where our narrator connects the “musty / smell” with “her truth.” Her truth smells dirty. It is unclean and smells musty, like it has been hidden away for a long time in the cellar. It is damp and dark. Trying to address it, to clean it up, endangers something precious. Her dignity. Her long-hidden hurt. Her pain. The brush brush brush of the mushrooms moves into the subconscious struggles of “her truth,” which has never seen the light of day. A powerful haiku of tender care and remorse.

trying to call it off  
her face keeps changing  
in leaflight <sup>19</sup>

Like the haiku in the night forest, this haiku suggests a couple. One of the couple is “trying to call it off” and the other one is watching the changing “leaflight” on her face as she tries to decide. I love this word Bill invented. “Leaflight” suggests a flickering, changing light. Light is coming through the moving leaves. The lover’s face is beautiful as it changes colors. Everything is indeterminate. Shadow and light. Yes or no. Maybe. Trying but unable to decide. There is a beauty in indecision and flickering leaflight. One of my students observed that you could read that invented word as “leaf flight.”

feathery frost  
on the windows  
room with the empty cradle <sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the narrator of this haiku was never able to have children, or had lost a young child. I read this haiku as a poem of grief. The “feathery frost” is beautiful in its own way, forming on the cold windows in the unused nursery. Yet there is a pervasive sadness because it appears in the “room with the empty cradle” instead of being shared with a young child. Out of the empty coldness this beautiful thing has grown, but it will not last.

back from the war  
all his doors  
swollen shut <sup>21</sup>

This Touchstone Award haiku by Pauly takes the perspective of a veteran who has returned home “from the war.” However, this homecoming is not a celebration. The veteran has been changed by the war. He is not himself. He has trouble leaving his room and being out in the community. Metaphorically, “all his doors / swollen shut” keeps him from moving on. He is home but cannot open his psychological doors to himself nor the social doors of being home. He is not entirely back from the war. Richard Gilbert cites this haiku as an example of a one-image haiku exhibiting strong disjunction. Gilbert asks us to “observe the dual, mutually-exclusive layers of literal versus psychological implication of ‘doors swollen.’”<sup>22</sup>

nemesister<sup>23</sup>

This is an example of Pauly’s experimentation with an enjambed haiku. Two words have been combined into a portmanteau of nemesis and sister. The blending of nemesis (a person who is usually victorious in any competition) with sister results in an interesting juxtaposition. Sisters know each other very well and know how to push each other’s buttons. Who will get the best of today’s situation? This haiku reminds me of two elderly sisters I know who still compete as if they were children. Maybe they like the challenge! I assume that the narrator of this haiku is one of the sisters. She recognizes that this dual relationship of being sister and nemesis for each other is simply their destiny.

wheeling her chair  
 through leaf fall ...  
 we sure knew how to dance<sup>24</sup>

This haiku features a sweet scene of an elderly couple. The husband is taking care of his ailing wife. She loves autumn and misses getting outside of her hospital or sick room. He takes her out for a ride in the wheelchair and they both enjoy being under the “leaf fall.” The wind is blowing her thinning white hair, but she smiles as he wheels her around and around, not going anywhere. The haiku ends with his voice or memory saying “we sure knew how to dance,” which recalls years of romance. Notice the

euphony of this haiku. One two three one two three ... pause ... ta da ta da ta da. We can feel the dance moves and hear the song of their love.

This last haiku by Pauly was published by Shirley and I in the winter issue of *Mayfly* magazine in January 2021, shortly before Bill passed on February 16, 2021. It is the title poem for our collection of his selected haiku.

walking uneven ground  
to tend her grave ...  
Remembrance Day<sup>25</sup>

This haiku was written about a visit to his mother's grave. Bill was elderly when she died, so he related to her frailty and losses before dying. In this haiku, he is being the dutiful son, going to visit his mother on Remembrance Day. The ground is uneven. It is not easy going. But he makes his way to pay last respects.

It was an honor to know Bill Pauly and to celebrate a life well-lived as a haiku poet. Bill signed my copy of *Wind the Clock by Bittersweet* with this inscription: "Wishing you many sustaining moments along your Haiku Way. Excelsior!" To Bill we are so grateful to say thank you for inviting us along your haiku journey. Excelsior indeed!

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Bonsai* 1.3

<sup>2</sup> Higginson, William J. *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku*. New York: Kodansha International, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> *High/Coo* 4

<sup>4</sup> *High/Coo* 5

<sup>5</sup> Pauly, Bill. *Wind the Clock by Bittersweet*. Battle Ground, Ind.: High/Coo Press, 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *Cicada* 2.3

<sup>8</sup> *High/Coo* 12

<sup>9</sup> *Frogpond* 4.3

<sup>10</sup> Willmot, Rod, ed. *Erotic Haiku*. Canada: Black Moss Press, 1983.

<sup>11</sup> *Frogpond* 6.3

<sup>12</sup> *Frogpond* 7.4

<sup>13</sup> *Frogpond* 9.4

<sup>14</sup> *Frogpond* 14.3

<sup>15</sup> Hayes, Melanie. "Bill Pauly's Haiku." Hayes, Melanie. "Bill Pauly's Haiku." Webpage. <https://www.brooksbookshaiku.com/MillikinHaiku/writerprofiles/Hayes-OnPauly.html>. Accessed Jan 17, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Brooks, Randy M. and Lee Gurga, eds. *Midwest Haiku Anthology*. Decatur, Ill.: High/Coo Press, 1992

<sup>17</sup> Van den Heuvel, Cor, Editor. *Baseball Haiku: The Best Haiku Ever Written About the Game*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Pauly, Bill. *Walking Uneven Ground: Selected Haiku of Bill Pauly*. Taylorville, IL: Brooks Books, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Betty Drevniok Award 2004, honorable mention

<sup>20</sup> *Walking Uneven Ground: Selected Haiku of Bill Pauly*.

<sup>21</sup> *Modern Haiku* 42.1

<sup>22</sup> Gilbert, Richard. *Poetry as Consciousness: Haiku Forests, Space of Mind, and an Ethics of Freedom*. Japan: Keibunsha, Co. Ltd, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> *Modern Haiku* 44.1

<sup>24</sup> *The Heron's Nest* 18.4

<sup>25</sup> *Mayfly* 70