

Loading a Gun: Imagery in Haiku

David Grayson

Several years ago, coming home from work, I was robbed at gunpoint. I was walking to my car from a subway station and three young men approached me. One lifted a handgun from his jacket pocket and pointed it directly at me.

Although many years have passed, the details of this episode remain clear and vivid: an overcast sky pregnant with moisture; the odor of alcohol on the breath of one assailant; the thin handgun barrel, which looked almost like a toy. In that moment, I truly had no idea if I was going to make it out alive.

gunshot—
a rush of crows
peppers the sky

Isabelle Prondzynski¹

Fortunately, I was not hurt. The following day, I was relating the details to a friend. He asked what went through my mind as the situation unfolded. I remembered that a feeling of dread enveloped me but I didn't recall "thinking" anything. Rather, I saw images of my children. Facing the prospect of death, my reflexive response was without words.

A recent Harvard study confirmed the primacy of thinking in images or pictures, also known as "visual thinking." It found that "visual thinking is deeply ingrained in the brain" and that "even when people consciously attempt to think verbally, visual thinking nearly always intrudes." One of the lead researchers, Elinor Amit, hypothesizes that this behavior is evolutionary: "For a long time, we understood our world visually, so maybe language is an add-on."² Lynell Burmark, a well-known educator in the field of visual literacy, notes that "we process images 60,000 times faster than words."³ These findings underscore why the haiku form can be so effective at transmitting or sharing a moment, and also what makes a particular poem successful.

Of course, strong imagery has long been understood to be a key part of poetry. It's important to keep in mind that it is close attention to detail

that is crucial. Amy Lowell wrote that in order to “present an image,” the poem “should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous.”⁴ In her poetry primer, Mary Oliver observes: “It is the detailed, sensory language incorporating images that gives the poem dash and tenderness.”⁵ Even a single concrete detail can make the difference between an image that is effective and one that is not.

late call for dinner
the click of a toy gun
in the twilight⁶

Ron Moss’ poem conjures a familiar scene: a child playing outside in the thinning light, maybe reluctant to leave the world of his or her imagination. Moss invokes a second sense (hearing) to help paint the scene. The word “click” is onomatopoeic and it brings the reader directly into the presence of the child outside. Deploying more than one sense can reinforce and fill in a picture. Robert Spiess noted, “I find that the better haiku poets use multiple sense-imagery...”⁷

birthday cake
the cowboys and cowgirls
drop their guns⁸

In a snapshot, Nick Hoffman exposes the ubiquity of guns in American society, even as toys. The “birthday cake” instantly sets the scene of a childhood milestone. “Cowboys and cowgirls” reference a national archetype. While humorous, Hoffman’s poem prompted an intellectual response for me—a result of my first-hand experience. Whatever one’s position in the gun control debate, it’s undeniable that firearms occupy a symbolic seat in American culture—relating to conceptions of independence, safety, and power, as well as connection to nature (hunting). Hoffman’s haiku led me to ask if I was a victim not only of three individuals but also of a violent dimension of this ethos.

Machine gun: between his eyebrows a red flower blooms⁹

Ezra Pound admonished poets to “use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something.”¹⁰ Saito Sanki does not waste a single word in his haiku. In this English translation, each of the three units is essential. “Machine gun” and “between his eyebrows” represent the subject (indirectly) and direct object, respectively. The third element, “a red

flower blooms,” is both literal and figurative. A blooming flower conveys the sudden onrush of red blood from the gunshot, forcefully describing the denouement. What some might consider to be an inherent handicap when compared to other forms of writing (less words) is an advantage for Sanki. Brevity compels the elimination of each extraneous word.

inside the apple core
a pocket full of sorry
kills the gun¹¹

Non literal work, from LANGUAGE poetry to some gendai haiku, forces the reader to see words afresh, outside of their normal sequence and context. In Alan Summers’ haiku, the phrase “apple core” conjures something essential and constitutive. The line “a pocket full of sorry” evokes considerable (“full”) pain and regret. “Gun” is the final word and it closes with a hard consonant. It seems that something vital has been extinguished. Three disparate images combine to convey a sentiment of pain and death. While semantically non-linear, it’s important to recognize that Summers’ words are sharp and concrete.

The categories “verbal” and “visual” are not wholly separate, however. A neuroscientist and literary scholar, Laura Otis points out that the two “coexist in every mind” and reflects that creativity “often emerges when they interact.”¹² Burmark says that “there is a natural progression in the way we process information: first the image, then the words.”¹³

more automatic words about weapons¹⁴

It is the interplay between our interior images and words that is the difficult work of composition. This may entail juxtaposition, a key practice of the haiku poet. More fundamental, it involves choosing the appropriate words and removing those that do not contribute (or those that distract or dilute the picture). As John Stevenson reminds us, such discipline is not always evident in public discourse.

Removed in time from my experience, I nevertheless still remember it visually. I’ve retained the indelible image of the revolver, as if I am still standing on the wet pavement. But paired with it is another image that I treasure: my family.

Notes

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2. Peter Reuell, "The Power of Picturing Thoughts," *The Harvard Gazette* (May 11, 2017). <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/05/visual-images-often-intrude-on-verbal-thinking-study-says/>. Accessed July 28, 2018.
3. Dian Schaffhauser, "Picture Perfect: Teaching to Visual Literacy" - Interview with Lynell Burmark, *THE Journal* (December 19, 2012). <https://thejournal.com/articles/2012/12/19/picture-perfect-teaching-to-visual-literacy.aspx>. Accessed July 28, 2018.
4. Amy Lowell, "Preface," *Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915), p. vii.
5. Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), p. 92.
6. Ron C. Moss, *The Bone Carver* (Ormskirk, Great Britain: Snapshot Press, 2014).
7. Robert Spiess, "Multiple Sense-Imagery in Haiku," *Modern Haiku* 2.1 (Winter 1970), p. 16.
8. Nick Hoffman, *Modern Haiku* 47.2 (Summer 2016), p. 72.
9. Saito Sanki, in Hiroaki Sato, "From the 2.26 Incident to the Atomic Bombs: Haiku During the Asia-Pacific War," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* (Volume 14, Issue 21, No. 3 - Nov 2016).
10. Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (March 1913).
11. Alan Summers, *hedgerow: a journal of small poems*, #111.
12. Laura Otis, "A New Look at Visual Thinking," *Psychology Today* (February 16, 2016). Url: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/rethinking-thought/201602/new-look-visual-thinking>. Accessed July 28, 2018.
13. Lynell Burmark, The Thornburg Center website: <http://tcpd.org/Burmark/Handouts/WhyVisualLit.html>. Accessed July 28, 2018.
14. John Stevenson, *Frogpond* 41:2 (Spring/Summer 2018), p. 16.