

Experimentation with One-Word Haiku

by Pravat Kumar Padhy

Experiments in writing haiku beyond the traditional three-line English-language haiku we all know have been attempted, including in one-line (monostich), two-line, and even four-line haiku. Naturally, each of these, even the monostich, usually contains two or more words. In this essay, I'm interested in focusing on haiku consisting of a single word. Before we look exclusively at one-word haiku, I first want to provide examples of effective haiku with explicit meaning and inter-juxtapositions by a few poets who have tried writing in the two-word format. The first by Cor van den Heuvel:

rain
tracks 1

The following two-word haiku by Marlene Mountain could in fact be a single word haiku, depending on spelling decisions, but I saw it as an example of a two-word haiku:

rain
dr p
o 2

The following are indisputably two-word haiku, all that was needed to convey the haiku moment:

stars crickets *George Swede*³

puddles bubble *Martin Lucas*⁴

beeline to *Chuck Brickley*⁵

How can we convey the haiku moment in a single word? If we do, is it still haiku? What, then, causes the juxtaposition inherent to the haiku form versus other types of poetry? When we view one-word haiku, even more so than two-word haiku, it seems the “poetic spell” has been compacted in a tiny cell analogous to the information stored in DNA. Only what is essential is there for the reader, who can juxtapose the word or image against their everyday experience. The varieties of urban life, landscapes, livelihood, etc., all tend to influence new images in complementing ways. You might say, more than other forms of haiku, the one-word haiku evolves the reader’s interpretation the furthest. In the same way

it is wonderful to read extremely minimalistic fiction, or flash fiction, such as this six-word example by Ernest Hemingway “For sale: baby shoes, never worn,” poetic Minimalism has likewise evolved with an understanding of influence in modern life.

How long have we been heading in this direction? Marlene Mountain in a 1986 essay “One-Line Haiku” mentions: ‘sent Bill [Higginson] & V [Virginia Brady Young]’ of visual/unaloud and two one-word haiku”:

abovethecloudsthecloudsabove

and

skyinthecLOUDsinthesky

6

What differs between these haiku and the rest of my examples is that the poet is playing with making new words by combining several words to get their poetic moment across of unified experience with nature.

Before Marlene Mountain’s essay “One-Line Haiku,” true one-word haiku had been written. Arguably, the most famous one-word haiku of all time:

tundra

Cor van den Heuvel’s historical one-word haiku “tundra” stands out as unique with its image having a seasonal reference and its juxtaposition to the surrounding page. Tundra is a biome where tree growth is hindered by low temperatures and short growing seasons. The term tundra means “uplands, treeless mountain tract.” Cor van den Heuvel experimented with his much-debated poem “tundra”— written slightly below the center of a blank page in his 1963 book *the window-washer’s pail*. It is a two-syllable word. He candidly says of the poem “One may say that a one-word haiku is naming, but one could add that it is the exception that proves the rule. All haiku are descriptions except one-word haiku.”

In an interview with Carmen Sterba in the blog Troutswirl, van den Heuvel said:

It is what it is: a level or undulating plain characteristic of arctic or subarctic regions. The important things are to see it alone in the mind or in the middle of an otherwise blank page and to color it with a season, preferably spring when it is blowing forever with grasses, flowers, birds (with their nests and eggs), and insects; or in winter when it is covered with endless drifted snow. To see the vastness of it spreading out from the word across the page and across the world. And to hear the sound of it. The word.⁷

He commented elsewhere further on the form as a whole:

I began to think of one-image and one-line haiku as a part of my approach to haiku. There is almost always something else in the experience of the reader that will resonate, if only sub-consciously, with a single image—if that image is striking and evocative enough. One may think of it as an invisible metaphor.⁸

Critical about the use of the one-word haiku, Martin Lucas (author of the wonderfully insightful essay “Poetic Spell” and long-time editor of *Presence*) opined in his disagreement:

I agree that there are good reasons why ‘tundra’ should work where another single word might not. It is vivid, communicating a sense of landscape. The starkness of the single word reflects the bleakness of that landscape; so does the blank white page which (as originally presented) surrounds it. It becomes an isolated utterance dropped into a vast expanse in a way which parallels the hopping of Bashō’s frog into its pond; and yet, despite this, it remains an isolated, unrelated word, which it is absurd to consider copyrighted. I think the exercise of presenting a one word haiku does draw attention to the elemental character of the concrete noun: every concrete noun is an image which speaks to the senses and is a kind of proto-haiku. But does the trick bear repetition? The proper composition of haiku involves the combination of such elements, the arrangement of images so that they illuminate each other.⁹

Marlene Mountain quoting Allan Watts feels differently about the “tundra” poem, not questioning it as a haiku but suggesting that tundra achieves “a silence of the mind in which one does not ‘think about’ the poem but actually feels the sensation which it evokes— all the more strongly for having said so little.”¹⁰

Michael Dylan Welch has commented on the poem as well:

I would suggest that it is, especially if we interpret the word “tundra” to be like a rock first emerging from melting snow in spring. . . . [T]he tundra is far from barren. Rather, it teems with life, but on a smaller and slower scale. This unsaid hinting at things, this implicative space (“*ma*” as the Japanese call it), this appreciation for the small amid vastness, is why I appreciate this poem as a haiku.”¹¹

He further adds, “As a poem completed in the heart, Cor van den Heuvel’s peerless ‘tundra’ is part of a large poetic conversation, a large poetic territory.”

The following are some of the one-word haiku composed over the years.

!
rain 12

The haiku above is written by Paul Reps. It includes a pictorial image of rain!

shark 13

Probably the second ultra-minimalistic haiku after “tundra” is “shark” by Alexis Rotella, published in *Frogpond* in 1983. Jim Kacian commented:

These have proven to be very difficult to do, at least in part because maintaining a just balance between verbal and visual surface is an extremely challenging task. Sometimes these formal choices are combined, as, for example, in one-word haiku such as “tundra” by Cor van den Heuvel, and “shark” by Alexis Rotella. In both of these examples, a single word is arrayed against the solid whiteness of a whole page. Both are dependent upon context (or lack of context) for their impact, and so are more visual than one-line in function.¹⁴

fossillence *Nicholas Virgilio*¹⁵

Nicholas Virgilio later categorized the haiku above as one of his “weirds.” In an article, “The Shape of the Things to Come: Form Past and Future in Haiku,” Jim Kacian termed it as the “overlap haiku.” Charles Trumbull termed it as “compressed word.”¹⁶ Whatever term one might choose, this next haiku is a great example of the same style:

leaflight *Allan Burns*¹⁷

I wonder if the following one-word haiku is meant to be a homonym, alluding to the author of “tundra”:

core *John Stevenson*¹⁸

sad *Nathan Braund*¹⁹

Martin Lucas commented on Nathan Braund’s haiku above in reference to “tundra”:

We have already encountered the one-word haiku, in the form of Cor van den Heuvel’s ‘tundra,’ which I can defend with the following justification: since haiku is the poetry of the concrete noun all concrete nouns are, in essence, haiku. In Nathan

Braund's 'sad' we have a one- word poem which is an adjective (the part of speech treated most suspiciously by haiku poets). How do we read this?²⁰

In her 1978 essay "One Image Haiku," Marlene Mountain theorized:

Though haiku is a three hundred year old modern art often anticipating concepts of the Minimalists of the 20th century, the Japanese poets were obliged to stop just short of such purity. Consider Bashō—in the land of cherry blossoms—writing: "*sakura*" [a cherry (tree); cherry blossoms]. He came close. But because of the seventeen syllable convention he was obliged to write: Many - many things bring to mind cherries *kan*. Today's critics and poets would frown on such an unnecessary comment. But what Bashō was unable to do, Cor van den Heuvel did: "tundra." Like *sakura*, tundra is a beautiful sound. However, while *sakura* is an immediately beautiful image, tundra is not. As crow on a withered branch enlarged 'poetic beauty' for the Japanese, so tundra should for us.²¹

Recently, a one-word haiku featured on the *Haiku Dialogue* blog:

taiga

Simonj²²

The editor, Lori A Minor, comments:

This reminds me a bit of Cor van den Heuvel's "tundra" and both are just brilliant in very different ways. Given the theme of climate change, this poem, "taiga" is powerful in its one-word form. The white space around the word is necessary, not only for creating a snow-like effect, but also for creating the illusion of isolation which emphasizes the importance of the taiga forest. This particular forest, being the largest land biome, supplies so much oxygen. If we do not make positive changes to the environment, like saving the taiga forest, the world as we know it will cease to exist.²³

Simonj has clarified that "taiga" is a direct reference to "tundra."²⁴ Although I consider "tundra" a concrete poem rather than haiku, it is a well-known work by another *haijin*. Perhaps, in summary, the common ground we've covered examining historical examples of one-word haiku is that the literal juxtaposition of the tundra/taiga biome boundary will no doubt move as the climate changes. So let the Minimalist pioneer, Marlene Mountain, have the final words:

I believe in change (one might as well, as it's inevitable). Sometimes its evolutionary and we're hardly aware of it, other times it's revolutionary and all we can do is to hang on for dear life. Usually it takes quite a bit of time to understand, but it is in change that we get closer to life, to art, and to ourselves.²⁵

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