

Essays

Editing Haiku

by *Owen Bullock*

Proportionately, I would say I spend as much time editing haiku as any long form poem. Occasionally, I have the experience of a haiku arriving fully formed, but that is rare. More often, it takes many revisions, even in this short form, before I find the best shape, and clarity, to discern the core of the experience I'm trying to represent – writing soon becomes editing.

Jim Kacian puts it beautifully when he writes, “Good editing is not intended to destroy the moment, but rather to expose it as clearly and truthfully as it is possible to do” (2006, n.p.). He reminds us that there's no hurry: the moment of insight will remain so, transcending time, and if it takes us a little while to find the best version of a haiku, that needn't be seen as any kind of problem. The point about time is particularly pertinent for me, as I'm sometimes impatient for work to be finished. If reading haiku, like all good poetry, is about slowing us down, so too does the editing process, at least when we embrace it fully. It can be a long process to find the right phrase, the right word, and a brevity suited to the form. The thirteen examples discussed in this essay are from my own writing, because I know the process firsthand, and I've retained the stages of revisions. Each of these pieces has eventually been published. I group the edits into three broad categories (which emerged from the writing itself): Form (including line order and use of space); Word choice (including repetition); and What's essential.

Form (including line order and use of space)

The following haiku was originally:

meditation –
the dent
in the monk's head

I submitted this first version to several magazines, without success. Then, one day, I was thinking about the way the information unfolds in the poem and edited it to:

meditation –
the dent in the monk's
head

The detail that the dent is in the monk's head, and not in some inanimate object, is now delivered later, in the way a comic actor might work – it's really an example of comic timing and creates a useful, momentary misdirection which adds impact. When I submitted this revised haiku, not only was it accepted by *The Heron's Nest* (March, 2011), but the editor I was assigned told me that all four editors had voted for it when consulted. Additionally, it was included in the Red Moon Anthology *Carving the Darkness* (2012) and in my collection *breakfast with epiphanies* (2012). Sometimes, a little adjustment goes a long way. I now use this suspenseful technique often, even in more serious works.

I originally set this haiku out in four lines. At times, four lines is a good option where the length of phrases suits the poem. Tito has made an art form of the four-liner, but it is still, as Kacian asserts, a relative rarity (2010a, n.p.):

the arc
of the rugby ball
spinning end to end
in the late arvo sky

A slight edit helped suggest the ball could be spinning the sky:

the arc
of the rugby ball
spinning end to end
the late arvo sky

I wondered if this idea would be stronger or weaker in a single line. The single line has differing semiotic potentials to the three-line haiku. Sometimes the line becomes energised in what Kacian has elsewhere termed ‘speed rush.’ Sometimes ideas are forced together creating new meanings, or a pleasing sense of ambiguity, assisted by the lack of caesura and/or punctuation. Kacian talks about one-liners which offer ‘multi-stops,’ with more than one potential kijo. He describes the ‘one line-one thought’, where a single image is extended across the line, rather than contrasted with another image (Kacian 2010b, n.p.). I think my next version is of the ‘one line-one thought’ variety, with a hint of speed rush:

arc of the rugby ball spinning end to end the late arvo sky

I decided one could still get a sense of the ball spinning the sky, even without the second article, so I removed it:

arc of the rugby ball spinning end to end late arvo sky

Overall, the energy of the single line seemed preferable here, and after many false starts this version was published.

What’s best for the poem is what’s most important in the editing process; I’m not always the best judge: others often see simple, yet effective edits. I submitted this haiku to *Echidna Tracks: Australian Haiku* in 2021:

sunset
red trail
to red horizon

Editors Simon Hanson and Gavin Austin said they’d be happy to accept the poem but suggested it might be even more effective on one line, which I hadn’t tried for this particular piece, though I usually do render each haiku in one line to judge the alternative:

sunset red trail to red horizon

I agreed that this format was more effective, since it matched the content with regard to both the trail and the horizon, and it lends a degree of speed rush to the poem (I wouldn't say it's a 'one line-one thought' piece because there is some contrast, as well as some continuity, between the sunset and the rest of the poem). The idea that form is nothing more than an extension of content has been an influential one, and neatly articulated by Charles Olson in the late 1950s (338). Lyn Hejinian further nuanced this idea by arguing that form was not a fixed product but an activity (n.p.), which implies that we discover the right arrangement for each piece of writing by pursuing the activity of writing (and editing). These are ideas to which I have had frequent recourse, and I address them variously in the different genres that I work in – the ideas seem to me relevant to all genres.

The progress of the next haiku concerned line order. Its history reminds me that nothing is ever finished. It was first published in *Kokako* 2 (2004) in the following form:

below the cliff
 carrying voices
 fishing boat

When selecting work for my first collection *Wild Chamomile* (2009), I asked the late Cyril Childs to read the manuscript and give me his opinion. He made recommendations which led to several improvements, including a change of line order for this piece:

below the cliff
 a fishing boat
 carrying voices

The haiku now has a freer rhythm, and the 'reveal' comes later: what the boat is carrying is delivered more subtly. After appearing in my collection, this version was selected for the Red Moon Anthology, *Evolution* (2011). I've learned that, even after first publications, it doesn't hurt to re-visit poems in search of improvements.

Cyril's advice opened up other editing possibilities. Here is the full progression of another haiku which benefitted from a reorganized line order:

New Year's Day –
two swings
at the trouser leg

two swings
at the trouser leg –
New Year's Day

two attempts
at the trouser leg
New Year's Day

By leaving the setting till last, the action that prompted me to write is now what the reader encounters first. Before the revised version, the haiku was in danger of merely representing cause and effect, as explained by haiku poet and teacher Lee Gurga (108-109). The cause is New Year's Eve, so that my original version could be construed as an example of what Gurga calls context and action (108-109), but it's made stronger (through a process of discovery) in the edit.

There's also an important revision of word choice here, which I'll be focusing on in the next section, but mention now because some haiku require more than one type of change. The choice of 'attempts' over 'swing' is a kind of stylisation. The word 'swings' was nicely literal, but 'attempts' brings more humour and engagement with the human predicament (which is a surprisingly common one, in this case). The em-dash proved unnecessary. This haiku had been submitted many times before, but in this form was finally published by *The Heron's Nest* (March 2012), and in *breakfast with epiphanies*.

The next haiku began life as:

quiet park
a bubble shuffles along
the stream of rain

I wondered about a single-line version because it might suit the sense of movement in this piece, and the fact that a short window of time is represented. The single-line form benefits pieces that happen rapidly, the effect of speed rush enhancing that feeling. Arranging the haiku in one line resulted in a small edit of the article:

quiet park bubble shuffles along the stream of rain

This has happened a few times: the way the words run together in the single line means that articles are sometimes less essential, as though the linkage and identification they provide isn't absolutely necessary, though we might often prefer an article for the sake of smooth English, avoiding the learner's pitfall of editing them out routinely for a too-easy economy. The missing article also has the effect of making the word 'bubble' function like a name, and reminds me of the habit of some poets to address the inanimate object as if it's animate, which can be both pleasing and surprising.

And yet, with this one, I missed that stronger sense of the three-part rhythm (it's still there, but less clear in the single-line version). I realised, too, on recollection, that although the scope of this event was relatively brief, it involved slight pauses; it was unhurried, so that the use of speed rush was not the best way to optimise the poem. So, I went back to what I originally had (article and all):

quiet park
a bubble shuffles along
the stream of rain

In fact, the haiku needed slowing down, rather than speeding up. I decided on a caesura mid-line to help focus attention first on what we see and then what it does; this pause splits the movement and clarifies the process of seeing:

quiet park
a bubble shuffles along
the stream of rain

Additionally, the pause makes the stream of rain seem separate from the bubble action, which in a way it is: there are many things happening at once.

I wrote this piece before the pandemic, but I didn't submit it until after the pandemic had broken. By this time, the haiku may have come across to the editor as a subtly COVID-themed piece, with the word 'bubble' filling out a new meaning and context. Similarly, the word 'stream' stirs up its own contemporary references; yet the poem is grounded in a literal walk after rain. The situation reminds me that the reception of poems changes, inevitably, with the passage of time and with new events of global significance.

Word choice (including repetition)

Moving now from form to word, I remember thinking that I had almost got this haiku down straight away:

lonely
on the trail
a red parrot sings

But I was disappointed with the word 'sing,' which didn't feel specific enough. Later, visualising the scene again, I remembered that I'd been surprised at how much the red parrot's sound resembled a New Zealand bellbird: it wasn't really a song so much as a chiming sound, which I hadn't heard from this bird before; neither had I seen one so close and on its own. I edited the haiku to:

lonely
on the trail
a red parrot chimes

Happily, this edit enhanced the connection between the perceiving voice and the lonely parrot, i.e. both were alone, away from their mate, chiming in, as we say, over common ground. It is sometimes necessary to re-imagine a scene in a process Kacian calls ‘rediscovering your moment.’ Frequently, one has recorded or remembered an event inaccurately, and it can be some time before recall signals a better word choice (2009, n.p.).

As another example, in the following haiku I initially wrote:

surfers catch the wave last band of light

I was happy with the poem’s energy, convinced that the single-line was the best form and accorded with the movement described – it’s a combination, perhaps of the ‘one line-one thought’ and ‘speed rush’. But I wanted a more interesting active verb than ‘catch’ – which is adequate but rather obvious – so, much later, I tried:

surfers hit the wave last band of light

This felt slightly better, because ‘hit’ has other contemporary connotations, but it still didn’t feel like I’d achieved an arresting haiku. Then I re-imagined the scene, and particularly the way surfboards cut into waves, and wrote:

surfers score the wave last band of light

The word ‘score’ has multiple connotations and is both a richer and more precise word choice.

I submitted the following haiku to the journal *tsuri-dōrō* in 2022:

gallery –
an ant bestrides
the porcelain vessels

Editor Tony Pupello wrote that he was interested in the poem but suggested that the word ‘bestrides’ was ‘rather heavy for an ant,’ inviting me to submit an edited version at a later date. I conceded this point and a few months later submitted a revised version:

gallery –
an ant wanders
the porcelain vessels

He replied that he would happily accept ‘gallery’ but asked me to consider a re-write which might place it in a more ‘shi-shi,’ up-scale setting, as this would have an even greater effect on the ant/precious art drama, as well as the sub-drama of ant as viewer. He suggested something like:

SoHo gallery –
an ant wanders
the porcelain vessels

But he was aware that I’d need to put my own spin on it. I was intrigued with this idea, but, indeed, because I hadn’t been to Soho, it took me a while to come up with something that felt true enough to my own experience. I eventually volunteered:

uptown gallery –
an ant wanders
the porcelain vessels

Since it was quite a prestigious gallery, ‘uptown’ suggests ‘up market.’ This version satisfied us both.

One night, I got soaked walking home in the rain and felt quite ecstatic about it; the raindrops were magical. I wrote:

raindrops
 multiplied by the headlights
 bouncing off the road

But I knew I wanted to find a way to show the reader the raindrops being multiplied, rather than tell them that, so I went for repetition to do the work for me:

raindrops
 in the headlights, raindrops
 bouncing off the road

The poem was declined several times in this form. I started to wonder if it might work better to take the repetition even further (since there really were a lot of raindrops!):

raindrops
 in the headlights, raindrops
 raindrops bouncing off the road

That did the trick: the poem needed excess to get the idea across, rather than a minimal approach.

What's essential

More often than excess, haiku require the minimum of information to convey their suggestive miniature narratives. What does it need? What could I leave out? These are vital, recurring questions for the haikin.

Here is a series of edits which includes considering the single-line option but mainly concerns a process of refining the phrasing towards what is needed, with a minimalist result:

into the grey clouds
 the white corellas
 flock

into the grey clouds
white corellas
flocking

into grey clouds white corellas flocking

grey clouds
white corellas
flocking

grey clouds
white corellas
flock

grey cloud
white corellas
flock

The next sequence of revisions betrays an obsessive exploration of variations:

walking the beach
we kick up a little splay of sand
with each step

walking the beach
we kick up little splays of sand
with each step

walking the beach
we kick up little sand splays
with each step

walking the beach kick sand splays each step

beach walk
kicking up sand splays
each step

beach walk kicks up sand splays each step

beach walk
we kick up sand splays
each step

beach walk kicking up sand splays each step

Finally, I went back to an earlier version that had the advantage of concision, along with a three-part form which better indicated the components of the action:

beach walk
kicking up sand splays
each step

The following haiku was also submitted to *tsuri-dōrō* in 2022:

just reading
her Spanish name
that's a poem

Editor Tony Pupello suggested that, if I could re-work the third line, he would be interested in seeing it again. Later, I submitted this revised version:

just reading
her Spanish name . . .
haiku enough

Tony felt that 'just reading' was still not quite right, stressing that the purpose should really be to convey the poetry of her name alone without saying so. He asked me to consider this edit:

poet's circle –
just reading
her Spanish name

Whilst the new first line conveyed an experience I didn't have at the time of writing – I was reading alone – I loved it and couldn't think of any improvement or modification that I wanted to make. For me, it became an example of an imaginative haiku, though it might come across as a perfectly real situation to the reader, and, even in my case, one could say that I was taking part in a reading circle of one. Tony is really a co-author here, and I'm grateful to him for making the offer.

This brings me to a point I'd like to make about not being precious over one's words. If someone else sees a better version in them, I think that's fantastic. Sometimes an editor makes a suggestion one can't live with, or that makes the poem seem somehow not one's own, and in that case we're free to decline. But at other times another mind helps one close in more tightly on the specific moment, exposing it as clearly and truthfully as possible, as Kacian would say. I'd add that it's often a matter of optimising the expression of the poem. The process of editing is astutely evoked by Ferris Gilli in her article about the development of a haiku from conception to publication, particularly in relation to refining word choice (n.p.). Her writing hints at a long-term process and one which is surprisingly collaborative. In most cases, even with revisions from editors, we can surely acknowledge that the poet's experience was still the starting point – the poem wouldn't exist without them – but it's simply that the poem now has another source. Gilli accommodates both sources, as well as celebrating input from a writer's group (n.p.). When we bear in mind the ways in which we each respond to the history of the genre we're writing in, it becomes clear that all writing has a degree of collaboration to it, so that the

idea of editorial input from others needn't be a disturbing one.

Conclusion

I've given examples of an editing process here, not a foolproof or even very consistent or orderly one, but something which I think might be useful in terms of staying flexible. In the editing phase, I try most of my three-line haiku in one line, and vice versa, just to see what the differences are and whether the single line has advantages. I try haiku in two lines, with the assumption that, since they are often composed of two contrasting images, this might be appropriate (though frequently it isn't). I'd recommend switching things around to see where the strengths lie.

More than one example discussed highlights the need to re-imagine a scene, to think oneself back into the moment that gave rise to the poem, to find a more apt or precise word or phrase. It is surprising how often this strategy can be productive: it's as if the excitement of the moment we tried to record clouded our ability to articulate it. Form, order, and word choice are important considerations, and learning what is essential for a poem comes through experience built on experiment – the broader and more open that experiment is, the better.

Haiku can also act as a microcosm of general poetic principles, so that learning to edit haiku effectively might easily improve the editing of longer forms, since we are always concerned with things like structure, line order, and word choice. Furthermore, I would recommend being open to learning from any genre of writing. I've gained a lot from studying screenwriting and narrative modes. For example, in terms of brevity and voice and point of view. I write in many genres – haiku, tanka, haibun, renga, longer experimental poems, prose poetry, and traditional forms such as sonnets, villanelles, sestinas, and triolets. I try to invent my own forms and have taken the haibun as a model for other hybrids in my 'Fusion poems' series, in which I blend

linear experiments, prose poetry, haiku and tanka, and found material. I've published fiction. I write academic articles, largely about poetic techniques and processes and the therapeutic value of writing. Each of these genres has the capacity to inform the others, and working on any one creates fallow periods from the others.

Editing any writing is the bulk of the task. It can be just as enjoyable as the generative writing phase, but perhaps in a less dramatic and more sustained way. I have felt almost as happy editing poetry journals as writing poetry, since one is still so closely engaged with the genre; the same is true of teaching writing, and even of writing about editing.

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Notes:

1. *breakfast with epiphanies*, Tauranga, Oceanbooks, 2012, p. 55
2. *Echidna Tracks: Australian Haiku* 9, 2022, 27 Sept, <https://echidnatracks.com/2022/09/27/7965/>
3. *Echidna Tracks: Australian Haiku* 7, 2021, 28 July, <https://echidnatracks.com/tag/owen-bullock/>
4. *breakfast with epiphanies*, p. 33
5. *Wales Haiku Journal*, Winter, 2021, <https://www.waleshaikujournal.com/winter-2021>
6. From the sequence, '100 words of haiku', *Axon: Creative Explorations* 10:2, 2020, <https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issues/10-2/100-words-haiku>
7. *Presence* 68, 2020, p. 69
8. *tsuri-dōrō* 13, 2023, p. 2, <https://tsuridoro.org/issue-13-jan-feb-2023>
9. From the sequence, 'Somewhere in that mass of rock', *Communion* 15, 2021, <https://walleahpress.com.au/communion-15-Owen-Bullock.html>
10. From 'Somewhere in that mass of rock'
11. From the sequence, 'Haiku places', *The Burrow* 5, 2022, <https://oldwaterrat-publishing.com/haiku-places/>
12. *tsuri-dōrō* 13, p. 11

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