

Essays

“Out-and-out Vagueness”

by Brad Bennett

Many haiku are born of observation, and the haiku poet strives to be accurate and precise. Specificity helps to set the scene and invites the reader to partake of the haiku moment. As Mary Oliver explains in *The Poetry Handbook*, “The language of the poem is the language of particulars. Without it, poetry might still be wise, but it would surely be pallid. And thin. It is the detailed, sensory language incorporating images that gives the poem dash and tenderness. And authenticity.”² There are certain times, however, when you want to be deliberately vague in a haiku. William Higginson suggests that, “Generally, haiku poets avoid wide-open ambiguity. Without a fairly well-defined concrete image there is not much for the reader to build on. But occasionally risking the border of out-and-out vagueness produces startling results...”³ Vagueness suggests that the poem is unresolved, and readers may find that experience intriguing and inviting. In an essay titled “Thirteen Ways of Reading Haiku,” Michael Dylan Welch writes, “The Japanese haiku master Seisensui has referred to haiku as an ‘unfinished’ poem. This means that the *reader* finishes the poem by engaging with it. The art of reading haiku amounts to finishing the poem that the poet started.”⁴

Haikuists make decisions all the time about how specific or vague our words need to be. For instance, we might choose “flower,” “wildflower,” or “starflower,” depending on the needs of a particular poem. Each option does a different job.⁵ But there are also some deliberately vague words, such as “somewhere,” “anyone,” and “something,” that can create Higginson’s “out-and-out vagueness” in a haiku.

Here's an example:

somewhere
in the apple crate
one that fell at sunset vince tripi⁶

The word “somewhere” starts the reader off with uncertainty. We don’t know where we are, and we wonder about it. Then line two gives us a little more information. The observation is about an apple crate. We start thinking about the size of the crate, the colors and varieties of apples, or perhaps some object that has fallen, crawled, or flown into the crate. The last line brings us back to one specific apple, but we don’t really know which one. Or it may be alluding to a person who has died. The poem leaves us in a place of not knowing, a place of mystery and poignancy. It sets up an interesting tension between specificity and vagueness.

As we saw with tripi’s haiku, deliberately vague words can be very effective. First, and perhaps most importantly, being deliberately indefinite can produce some very effective dreaming room for the reader. As Paul Miller asserts in an essay called “The Secret of Writing Haiku,” “It is important to remember that each poem is two poems: the writer’s and the reader’s. As a writer I want to express my discovery in just enough words to lead the reader to discover what I did, but I don’t want to tell them too much or they lose their discovery.”⁷ The successful haiku is one that invites the reader to finish the poem with their own interpretation.

Secondly, really vague words also help to highlight the ambiguity that is natural and omnipresent in the world around us and, hence, in our haiku moments. That ambiguity is an important element in all poetry. A poem is a wondrous elixir of certainty and uncertainty, nonfiction and fiction. Jane Hirshfield believes that “... good poetry helps us be more richly uncertain, in more profound ways.”⁸ There is a vital and persistent tension between specificity and vagueness in the crafting of haiku. Used deftly, these indefinites

create or depict the tension between certainty and uncertainty. Ambiguity can be a powerful aspect of a haiku, if handled well.

Lastly, by being indefinite, the haikuist can also create emotional poignancy. Not knowing the specifics of a particular haiku moment may incite in the reader a yearning to know. Deliberately vague words can also heighten the emotional impact and contribute to various moods. Ambiguity and uncertainty can feel scary, painful, lonely, intriguing, inviting, creative, or exciting. A haiku containing a deliberately indefinite word can be mysterious, dreamy, curious, reflective, philosophical, lonely, sad, scary, eerie, addled, hopeful, or joyful.

YUGEN

Deliberately vague words in a haiku can also help to render the Japanese aesthetic concept of *yugen*. *Yugen* is "...a quality of quiet grace and mystery. Much is left unsaid. More is evoked than invoked. Perhaps that is the essence of *yugen*. Like the mist covering the mountains at dawn."⁹ Indefinite words may amplify the mystery and intrigue in a haiku. But *yugen* is something that is inherent in the haiku moment—it's not a writing technique in and of itself. As Susumu Takiguchi warns in an essay called "Being Specific and Vague," "*Yugen* is not something to be 'created' anyway. It emerges. Or, it doesn't."¹⁰ *Yugen* is there all around us. Our job is to notice it and write of it deftly, but not to create it artificially. Takiguchi writes of the difference between *yugen* (which he calls "good") and vagueness (which he calls "bad"). He warns English-language haikuists that deliberate vagueness is not necessarily the same as *yugen*. "One of what look to me to be the most common but seldom-mentioned mistakes which non-Japanese haiku poets tend to make is to confuse vagueness with *yugen* and similar Japanese aesthetic values."¹¹ I appreciate Takiguchi's point and believe that we English-language haiku poets sometimes inject a sort of "false *yugen*" into our haiku that may feel contrived or inauthentic to the reader. I've been guilty of that myself. We want

to make sure that the yugen in our haiku does not feel forced; we need to use each indefinite word mindfully. Let's take a look at some examples of haiku using really vague words, and you can judge whether their yugen is authentic or forced.

These deliberately vague words can be sorted into four major categories: indefinite places (somewhere, anywhere, elsewhere, etc.), indefinite times (sometime, anytime, etc.), unknown people (someone, anyone, etc.), and indefinite or unknown things (something, anything, things, etc.). Many of these words are compound words that start with "some" or "any." "Some" is very vague—it denotes an undefined position between none and all. "Any" is also very vague—it denotes at least one of set. But depending on how they are used, these words can occasionally denote "all" or "nothing," which I would argue are not vague and indeterminate. For instance, "not getting anywhere" means making zero progress rather than an indefinite amount of progress. For the purposes of this essay, I chose examples of haiku where I felt the deliberately vague words connoted genuine vagueness in a successful, intriguing, and provocative way. These haiku contain effective ambiguity, intriguing uncertainty, and emotional poignancy. Hopefully, they are also true to the yugen that Takuguchi championed. And, above all, they create plenty of dreaming room for the reader.

PLACE

First, let's look at some poems with words that create the setting, the place and time of the haiku moment. Indefinite words about place are very evocative. They convey that we know the event that is happening, but we just don't know where it is occurring. These words often suggest two places, the place where the observer is located and somewhere else. In the following two haiku, the word "somewhere" yields different emotions for the reader, perhaps hope in the first, and sadness in the second.

somewhere
above the thinning...
a bluebird's sunlit call

Kathryn Liebowitz¹²

rusted car
in the creek bed—
somewhere, a diary entry

Lee Hudspeth¹³

If you add the word “else” to “somewhere,” it ups the ante of tension between the location of the haiku moment and some other place, thus increasing the poem’s poignancy, while continuing to imply wonder and mystery. In the first haiku by Harvey below, the “somewhere else” implies the river’s past. In Lucky’s haiku, the “somewhere else” is actually present in the moment, but it is inside the author’s mind.

scattered showers—
the river full
of somewhere else

Michele L. Harvey¹⁴

day moon even here I’m somewhere else

Bob Lucky¹⁵

Other words that imply indefinite locations include “elsewhere,” “anywhere,” and “anyplace.”

singing bowls
the sound of elsewhere
shimmers

Pat Davis¹⁶

mountain in the mist
the distance from here
to anywhere

Bill Kenney¹⁷

arriving anyplace
these thoughts
of home

Tom Clausen¹⁸

The word “nowhere” sounds indefinite, but it can be a little tricky. It literally means “not anywhere.” If “nowhere” is used to mean that a location or an entity doesn’t exist, then that seems precise rather than vague. But you can also use the word as a synonym for “somewhere” or “anywhere,” as in these haiku by Stevenson and Harvey.¹⁹

the directions
to the cemetery
getting us nowhere

John Stevenson²⁰

prairie sky
the ubiquity
of nowhere

Michele L. Harvey²¹

TIME

During my search for haiku that include these very vague words, I didn’t find many haiku that used words about time that were truly vague and also effective. Like “nowhere,” “never” sounds vague, but it’s actually fairly precise and specific. Even the phrase “now and then” has a bit of specificity about it. The word “anytime” can be very vague, but it can also be used to mean “always,” which is not vague. The words “sometime” and “someday” were the ones that seemed to work best in denoting an indefinite time. The example poems below imply two moments, the present haiku moment, and some other time in the past. The uncertainty of “sometime” is also enhanced by other words, “unfamiliar” in Bostok’s poem and “haze” and “faintly” in McClintock’s.

unfamiliar room
sometime in the night
the chill of waking

Janice Bostok²²

sometime during the day
the shining haze has left this field
faintly green

Michael McClintock²³

The indefinite word “someday” can be used effectively to allude to hope or to potential yet to be realized.

full moon—
I’ll get back to myself
someday

Tom Clausen²⁴

drawn to your light caresses our someday

Julie Schwerin²⁵

PEOPLE

Now that we’ve examined place and time, let’s look at haiku that contain unknown or deliberately indefinite entities, the people and things that are a part of haiku moments. Using indefinite words for other people sets up relationships in our haiku that are unresolved. Even though the other person might be a total stranger, the fact that they’re mentioned in the poem creates a connection between the writer and the unknown person, and between the reader and the unknown person. “Someone” is a common and very effective word for an indefinite character in a haiku. In Lindquist’s haiku below, the reader feels a connection to an unknown rower.

island sunset
someone rows a red dory
out of the harbor

Kristen Lindquist²⁶

Using the word “someone” can also create emotional empathy and poignancy. For instance, there’s a sense of *mono no aware* (the acceptance and appreciation of the transience of life) in Muirhead’s poem below. In O’Connor’s poem, the use of “someone” becomes a way of reaching out to a stranger. There is a yearning for connection.

someone's last first cicada

Marsh Muirhead²⁷

winter night
reaching a page
someone has folded

Kieran O'Connor²⁸

As always, the way you use an indefinite word indicates how vague it is. Sometimes, it can actually create more specificity. Ironically, the “someone” in the poem below refers to a person who is becoming more familiar, and, hence, less vague:

park bench
a stranger
becomes someone

Brad Bennett²⁹

“Anyone” is another word that refers to an indefinite person and can help create emotional poignancy. It can allude to a sense of yearning, or even desperation.

waiting
for anyone
a field of daisies

Paula Sears³⁰

from the drug rehab
your collect call
for anyone

Mauree Pendergrast³¹

THINGS

Haiku are full of words that refer to vague things. Sometimes, the use of an indefinite word just means that the observer is having a sensory experience but can't fully delineate what they are sensing. For instance, one might see a red-tailed hawk flying off with "something" in its talons, but it's too far away to identify. The emphasis in haiku like these is usually placed on an activity or motion, rather than the entity itself (i.e. scratching or calling vs. bobcat or blackbird). Hence, some vague words are more about the lack of information about an object. But they can still create effective mystery. The most common word used to achieve this is "something." In this first poem below by Wilson, the unidentified "something with wings" could be a nighthawk, an owl, or even a kind of Dickinsonian hope. In Savage's haiku, the "something wilder" can take the reader in many directions. In Bridges' poem, the word "something" is repeated to produce a humorous senryu about lack of recall.

something with wings
over dark water
this moonless night

Billie Wilson³²

a deep breath
sandalwood
and something wilder

Grant D. Savage³³

his winning haiku
something something something
fireflies

Alan S. Bridges³⁴

In a few of the haiku that I studied, the word “something” seemed like a throw-in—like the author was purposely trying to make the poem mysterious. This produced what felt like false yugen. At other times, the word “something” effectively alluded to aspects of the haiku moment that were less defined and more abstract and mysterious. The “out-and-out vagueness” was more essential in these haiku, more authentic to the haiku moment. The mystery didn’t feel forced. Some of these poems alluded to ontological issues and philosophical musings.

it could be nothing
it could be something
winter darkness

Peggy Heinrich³⁵

between silent moonlit hills
something waiting
to be named

Leslie Giddens³⁶

something
in the clouds this morning...
my death poem

Jim Kacian³⁷

In examining haiku containing the word “something,” I noticed several successful examples in which it was included within longer phrases. For instance, “something inside me” or “something in me” are common ways to refer to personal feelings or thoughts that we notice, but perhaps can’t quite identify or describe.

a pallbearer
the weight of something
inside me

William Cullen, Jr.³⁸

first turtle
something in me
surfaces

Peter Newton³⁹

“Something else” and “something more” are two other phrases that can work effectively in a haiku. “Something else” can suggest movement and transformation. “Something more” can conjure strong emotions, like attraction, longing, and ennui.

Stillness
and the cloud becoming
something else Peggy Willis Lyles⁴⁰

collage workshop
everything
becomes something else Terry Ann Carter⁴¹

evening moon
something more
about her Daniela Misso⁴²

star-filled sky
both of us wishing
for something more Beverly Acuff Momoi⁴³

A haiku can also refer to something noticeably absent in a sensory experience, which can intensify emotional import, as in this haiku:

four a.m.—
listening
to something not there Ruth Holzer⁴⁴

The haikuist can also just use the word “things” in order to invoke vagueness. These unspecified things can be memories, as in Ahern’s haiku, assumptions, as in Root-Bernstein’s haiku, or problems, as in Stevens’ haiku.

winter solstice
things I can’t remember
things I can’t forget Mimi Ahern⁴⁵

maple leaves
some things go
without saying

Michele Root-Bernstein⁴⁶

some things
just can't be fixed
winter stars

Mary Stevens⁴⁷

OTHER WORDS

The words that I've highlighted so far are not the only really vague words that a haikuist can choose. Of course, there are other ways to imply out-and-out vagueness. Here are three examples using the words "whatever," "nothing else," and "unknowns."

whatever works for you morning glories

Polona Oblak⁴⁸

river
the color of nothing else
winter afternoon

Kristen Lindquist⁴⁹

spring in the air
I remove the unknowns
from my key ring

Deb Baker⁵⁰

MULTIPLE VAGUE WORDS

Of course, the haikuist can utilize more than one vague word successfully in the same haiku. A single haiku could include words that refer to more than one of the four categories of place, time, people, and things.

early equinox
something, somewhere
blooming

Julie Schwerin⁵¹

sometimes
something
someone
says
eaves
dripping

Jonathan McKeown⁵²

In addition, multiple vague words can act as opposites or antonyms that help to create tension or paradox in a senryu or haiku.

spin class
getting somewhere
going nowhere

Brad Bennett⁵³

a kingfisher calls
from out of nowhere
everywhere

Renée Owen⁵⁴

Of course, specificity will continue to remain a vital aspect of many of our haiku. Occasionally, however, the haikuist may want to write about a haiku moment that is full of mystery, intrigue, and yugen. When used mindfully and carefully, certain deliberately indefinite words can be apt and effective in creating examples of successful “out-and-out vagueness.” Uncertainty and ambiguity are an unavoidable part of life, often present in our haiku moments, and hence an important aspect of our haiku. As Pema Chödrön states, “...the truth is that we can never avoid uncertainty. This not-knowing is part of the adventure.”⁵⁵

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Notes:

1. William Higginson, with Penny Harter. *The Haiku Handbook*. New York: Kodansha International, 1985, p. 122.
2. Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994, p. 92.
3. William Higginson, with Penny Harter. *The Haiku Handbook*. New York: Kodansha International, 1985, p. 122.
4. Michael Dylan Welch, "Thirteen Ways of Reading Haiku," <https://www.graceguts.com/essays/thirteen-ways-of-reading-haiku>.
5. For more on this topic, see Charlie Trumbull, "Haiku Diction: The use of Words in Haiku," *Frogpond* 38:2, pp. 101-102.
6. *my turn now*. Jeannie Martin & John Martone, Eds. Northfield, MA: Swamp Press, 2023.
7. Paul Miller, "The Secret of Writing Haiku," *Frogpond* 32.1.
8. Jane Hirshfield, "Uncarryable Reminders: Poetry and Uncertainty," *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015, p. 149.
9. Leza Lowitz, in Hiroaki Sato, *Snow in a Silver Bowl: A Quest for the World of Yugen*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2013, pp. 4-5.
10. Susumu Takiguchi, "Being Specific and Vague," *World Haiku Review*, August 2017.
11. Susumu Takiguchi, "Being Specific and Vague," *World Haiku Review*, August 2017.
12. *hedgerow* 144.
13. *Kingfisher* 6.
14. *Acorn* 26.
15. *tinywords* 13.2.
16. *tsuri-dōrō* 5.

17. *Shiki Internet Kukai*, November 2012.
18. Previously unpublished.
19. For more examples of haiku that include the word “nowhere,” see Michael Dylan Welch’s essay, “Going Nowhere: Learning Haiku from Pico Iyer,” <https://www.graceguts.com/essays/going-nowhere-learning-haiku-from-pico-iyer>.
20. *Upstate Dim Sum* 2012/I.
21. *The Heron’s Nest* 22:2.
22. *Amongst the Graffiti*. Flaxon, Australia: Post Pressed, 2003.
23. *Simply Haiku* 2:3.
24. *Upstate Dim Sum* 2017/I.
25. *Prune Juice* 25.
26. *island*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2023.
27. *Modern Haiku* 39.1.
28. *The Heron’s Nest* 14:4.
29. *The Heron’s Nest* 26:1.
30. Previously unpublished.
31. *Brussels Sprout* 11:2.
32. *South by Southeast* 16:3.
33. *Firefly in the Room*. Carlton Place, Ontario: Catkin Pres, 2016.
34. *Prune Juice Journal* 29.
35. Francine Porad Award 2013.
36. *Blithe Spirit* 13:3.
37. *DailyHaiku*, July 7, 2013.
38. *Frogpond* 28:2.
39. The Haiku Foundation Per Diem Archive, Linda Weir, selector, July 2018, <https://thehaikufoundation.org/per-diem-archive-details/?ID-cat=362>.
40. Mainichi Haiku Contest 1999.
41. *Haiku Canada Review* 8:2.
42. *haikuNetra* 1:2.
43. *A Hundred Gourds* 1:3.
44. *bottle rockets* 7:2.
45. *Mariposa* 45.
46. The Haiku Calendar 2022, Snapshot Press.
47. *Another Trip Around the Sun: 365 Days of Haiku for Children Young and Old*. Jessica Malone Latham, Ed. Taylorville, IL: Brooks Books, 2019.
48. *The Heron’s Nest* 18:1.
49. *Akitsu Quarterly*, Fall/Winter 2023.
50. *Frogpond* 28:3.

51. *Frameless Sky* 15.
52. *A Hundred Gourds* 3:3.
53. *Failed Haiku*, September 2022.
54. *Modern Haiku* 42.2.
55. Pema Chödrön, *Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings*, Boston: Shambala, 2002, p. 5.

Brad Bennett, a former elementary school teacher, now teaches haiku to adults. He has published three collections of haiku with Red Moon Press: *a drop of pond* (2016), which won a Touchstone Distinguished Book Award from the Haiku Foundation, *a turn in the river* (2019), which was shortlisted for the Touchstone Award, and *a box of feathers* (2022), which won Honorable Mentions in the Touchstone Awards and Haiku Society of America's Merit Book Awards. He also served as the haiku and senryu editor of *Frogpond* from 2021-2023.