Essay

Beauty and Violence in Israel

by Rick Black

Israel is both a beautiful and violent land. I learned that during my six years living there, three of which I spent as a reporter in the Jerusalem bureau of The New York Times. I covered Palestinian demonstrations and the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf war, the arrival of Russian and Ethiopian Jewish immigrants and the founding of new Israeli settlements. I was often struck by the sharp contrasts of the country: Palestinians and Jews, the Negev and the Galilee, ancient and modern. Although I wanted to write about the country in a deeper way, to plumb its paradoxes and contradictions, I was limited by the parameters of the newspaper trade and its vocabulary. I was largely restricted to filing stories about war, demonstrations and terrorist attacks.

In 1992, when I returned to the States, I received a book about haiku—those tiny, imagistic poems that last so briefly but make an abiding impression like a firefly in the night. I loved their short, concise form and non-judgmental approach to the world. I began to read and learn more about haiku. In particular, I was struck by the poems of Nick Virgilio, a haiku poet who used the genre to deal with the death of his youngest brother in Vietnam.

> deep in rank grass,
> through a bullet-riddled helmet:
> an unknown flower
>
> *Nick Virgilio*

Reading Virgilio's poems, I realized that haiku might help sort out the contradictory emotions that Israel evoked in me. I started to write a lot of haiku and won several awards. When I returned to Israel a few years later, I jotted down some possible poems, thoughts and impressions. I strove to make connections between olive trees and refugee camps, military cemeteries and blossoming rosemary, great blue herons and F-16s in a way that I had always wanted to but was never able to do as a reporter. I wrote

about the stark images of Israel's landscape—images of peace and war, of hope and fear—and the way in which they blended together. I discovered haiku in the shattered remains scattered around the country; I found them in Jerusalem's alleyways and Galilee's orchards, at war memorials and religious shrines. I found them, in fact, hiding everywhere like thistles amid rocky outcroppings.

highway's edge—
old armored vehicles rust
beneath cypress trees

After my return from Israel, I sat at my desk each morning with my notebook and pencil. I recopied the poems—or intimations of poems—onto a sheet of paper, and then tried to listen to the words. A flood of sunlight often slanted into my study. I had to lower the window blinds to keep the sun's glare out of my eyes. Sometimes I paused to gaze up at a mourning dove nestled in the crook of a fig tree whose branches scraped against the window pane in the breeze. A prickly pear cactus grew beneath another window, reminding me of the Arab women who roamed through Jerusalem's neighborhoods, shouting, "Sabras, sabras!" with their cardboard cartons of sweet, juicy cactus fruit atop their heads. Surrounded by maps of Israel and Jerusalem, a poster by Marc Chagall entitled, "Paris View," books in Hebrew and English, and photos of the snow-covered yard of my childhood home in New Jersey, I allowed each haiku to transport me back to Israel. Sometimes I left the original version alone; at other times, I reworked it over and over as if using a mortar and pestle to grind hummus.

I tend to remain faithful to the three-line poetic form, but I often depart from a 5-7-5 syllable count in order to convey the poem's essence as concisely as possible in English. The core of each of my haiku resides in the tension between people and their surroundings or nature. The Zen-ness, the sense of wonder and awe, is created through a sense of paradox, contradiction, or internal comparison. I strive to capture a specific moment in time as well as the emotional layers of meaning and context that resonate within it. To achieve my effect, I purposely tap literary associations, cultural and religious traditions, and words in English, Hebrew and Arabic to connect the striated layers of time

that I sense so deeply and palpably in Israel. In doing so, I attempt to intermingle echoes of the past and future within the narrow confines of haiku.

1918 cemetery
an olive tree's new branches
shoot towards the sky

Like some post-World-War-II Japanese haiku poets, I am impatient with only writing about natural beauty in and of itself. I particularly enjoy experimenting with the interplay of the natural and human worlds, and often my poems are located at the intersection between the two. I believe that nature can also be used ironically. Like Tomizawa Kakio, an unconventional post-World-War-II Japanese haiku poet, I enjoy contrasting human and natural phenomena, as he does in this haiku below:

An aged seagull
Over waters where a warship foundered.
Tomizawa Kakio

Whether in Tokyo or Jerusalem, Kyiv or New York, haiku can and should depict the modern age and even incorporate images of missiles, tanks and other military weapons. It needs to deal with the realities of the 21st century. I deeply admire poets like Saito Sanki, a contemporary of Tomizawa who tried to deal with the horrific effects of war in Japan. In 1947, he penned this haiku:

Starving, how friendly
everyone is! The autumn wind
comes from the distance.
Saito Sanki

In another, he tried to deal with the aftermath of Hiroshima in his homeland. How could as delicate and short a poem as a haiku be used to reflect such an enormous, terrifying reality? Yet, he found a way to do it in a poem that later became quite well known:

At Hiroshima
when I eat a boiled egg
I open my mouth.
Saito Sanki

It is a lot to ask of such a short poem. Haiku have often been criticized for being too short—either inadequate to express complex realities or puerile because of their deceptive simplicity. The importance of a poem or a word, though, does not depend on its length but on its resonance. Through haiku, we can pass on our impressions to others like a fragile glass of wine and say: "Here, drink! Savor this moment, too!" For savoring the here and now, appreciating the "being-ness" of each thing, looking at the world in all its detail is what haiku have taught me.

desert fortress:
a succulent takes refuge
in its ruins

Nonetheless, I struggle to reconcile haiku's non-judgmental approach to life with my own deep-seated need to protest against life's injustice. I suppose that I have an ongoing argument with God about the world's imperfections—about people's cruelty to each other as well as nature's cruelty and seeming indifference to us. Simply to accept the world as it is, as Zen philosophy requires, does not come naturally to me. I have always found it difficult to accept a Japanese poetic form whose philosophical underpinnings contradict my Jewish sensibility. Yet, if it is a protest that I want to lodge, perhaps haiku is not the right place for it. Or, perhaps I should say, not the right form for it. Donald Keene, a Japanese literary historian, writes in a Japanese literary history, Dawn to the West, that "it is unlikely that the haiku can ever be the most effective form a writer can use to convey his indignation over, say, a political system that tolerates the terrible working conditions in the salt fields. An indictment in some other form—whether of journalism, fiction or modern poetry—would certainly be more likely to produce a strong effect."

In a certain sense, haiku have forced me to put aside my own sense of life's injustice. There are times to protest against life and times to accept it—and one needs to learn to distinguish between them. It is not always easy to accept life with a sense of grace. As R.H. Blyth writes in volume one of his classic four-volume work, Haiku, "When we are grasping the inexpressible meaning of these things, this is life, this is living. To do this twenty-four hours a day is the Way of Haiku. It is having life more abundantly." Most of the time, though, I cannot live so fully. I still feel compelled to protest against God's inscrutable ways in the universe. By writing haiku, though, I have found a way to put aside my protest for at least a few minutes each day and to savor life in all its mystery.

In 2007, I published a small, handmade dos-a-dos artist book with some of my haiku: Peace and War: A Collection of Haiku From Israel. On one side, I placed poems primarily about peace; on the other, mostly about war. All of them were linked together, as these two are in daily life in Israel, by a single binding. But dozens of poems never made it into the collection. They remained in my drawer—silent witnesses of a torn country.

With the massacre of Israelis on October 7 and the subsequent war in the Gaza Strip, I finally realized that I needed to share the rest of these poems, so I reworked many of them from their original form or publications where they had appeared. The difficulty, as it has always been for me, was how to organize them into a collection. By geographic region, by natural seasons or by other factors?

Ultimately, I realized that I needed to divide the poems again between peace and war; in fact, these are the main seasons of life in Israel. In organizing this new collection of haiku, Two Seasons in Israel, I have tried to create a sense of synergy by using an associative method of switching back and forth between images of peace and war. Sometimes, I group poems together in similar geographic regions, other times I connect natural season poems. But it is always with the idea of alternating poems of peace and war in the flow of the book. From one day to the next, one simply never knows what to expect.

Ironically, the smallness of haiku quite aptly mirrors the tiny size of Israel. Despite their brevity, haiku are able to convey a deep sense of the paradoxes of Israel and the people who are caught

in its heartrending complexities. They can also help us focus on the "little" things in life and cherish the time, however brief it is, that we have together.

last clouds—
if only the violence would
drift away, too

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