Haiku Toolbox: Some Thoughts on Cutting

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Traditional Japanese haiku are defined by three main characteristics: form (5-7-5 or seventeen onji structure), kigo (season word), and cut (the break between the haiku's two parts). Of the first characteristic, a strict syllabic count in English-language haiku doesn't make sense for a number of reasons, which isn't to say that successful 5-7-5 haiku haven't been written—they most definitely have—but the resulting poems aren't successful as a consequence of the form. Instead, form is incidental to the poems' success. And of the second characteristic, season-less *muki* haiku are often very effective. But of the last characteristic: uncut haiku rarely work.

Where Japanese haiku use cutting words such as *ka*, *keri*, *ya*, and a host of others, English-language haiku use either punctuation or grammatical breaks to separate the two parts of the poem. This separation creates a space for the reader to inhabit. Over the years this space has been described in various ways, including metaphors such as the gap in a spark plug; but simply put, the cut separates the haiku into its two images or elements and asks readers to puzzle-out or intuit their relationship.

Standalone haiku are an outgrowth of the first verse in a renku—a literary and collaborative linked verse dating from the eighth century. A renku consists of twelve to one hundred verses, with rules determining many of the verses' subject matter. They are often written by groups, sometimes at specific renku parties, where one poet's verse is followed by the verse of a second poet, whose verse is followed by the verse of a third, and so on. Although poets can write more than one verse.

The subject matter of a particular renku verse is often dissimilar to the verse that came before it, and in fact they can appear utterly unrelated, yet the fun of renku is trying to understand how the verses relate–or in renku parlance: how they are linked. This linking is a fundamental part of renku, and there are many ways to link verses: through word links, narrative links, action links, scent links, etc. It is this variety in linking methods

that causes some to assert that a foundation in renku is a requirement for haiku poets.

A space similar to that between renku links exists between the two parts of a haiku and the ways in which the parts are related (link) are similar. And similar to sorting out the linking in renku, the payoff in haiku is sorting out the relationship between the haiku's parts. A difference is that the short phrases of a haiku are often more relatable, taking place in the same scene or moment, whereas a renku link might be purely intellectual. And what separates the parts of a haiku is the cut.

Surprisingly, many books and essays on haiku seem to gloss over the importance of the haiku's two-part structure, or instead give it short shrift. One well-known "how-to" book gives it mention in only two sentences. Even the Haiku Society of America's definition of haiku makes only passing mention of the cut, and only in the notes section—not in the definition itself.

One book that gives good space to the topic is Jane Reichhold's *Writing and Enjoying Haiku*.[1] In it she includes an adapted version of her essay, "The Fragment and Phrase Theory,"[2] where she states: "There needs to be a syntactical break separating the verse into two distinct divisions." She labels these divisions the fragment and the phrase (the phrase being the longer, or two lines, of the haiku). She quotes Betty Drevniok from her book, *Aware—A Haiku Primer*,[3] in which Drevniok writes:

> In haiku the SOMETHING and the SOMETHING ELSE are set down together in clearly stated images.

We can add directly from Drevniok's book:

> ... whatever attracts the poet never stands alone. The SOMETHING that draws the poet is always noticed in context with SOMETING ELSE.

Reichhold then proceeds to illustrate the two-part structure using Drevniok's three main types of relationships in haiku: "Comparison," "Contrast," and "Association." An example of a haiku using the "Technique of Comparison" would be a haiku such as:

a brook
growing louder
wild violets

In Reichhold's parlance, "a brook / growing louder" is the phrase; "wild violets" is the fragment. But they could just as easily be called the "superposed section" and the "base" (Kawamoto[4]), or simply the long part and the short part. The important thing is that there are two parts and that they are separated by a grammatical cut which serves to set the two images side-by-side for comparison. The one part—a brook—grows louder as the seasonal rains or snowmelt feed it. Similarly, violets begin appearing as they are wont to do in spring. These two images are independent of each other, yet the reader can discern a similarity. There is an overall feeling of the season coming in.

Reichhold expands upon Drevniok's work by giving examples of twenty-one additional types of relationships, albeit briefly. However, one point glossed over by Reichhold and others is nicely made by *Modern Haiku* editor Lee Gurga in his book *Haiku: A Poet's Guide.*[5] Speaking generally of the two parts of a haiku, he says:

> How these images relate to one another is a matter of some delicacy. The relationship cannot be too obvious or the poem will be trite, but if it is too distant the association of images will appear forced or arbitrary.

An example of this 'triteness' can be found in haiku that describe cause-and-effect relationships. For example:

breakfast —
plum juice drips
down my chin

That the juice of a plum would drip from the poet's mouth during any meal is not surprising. It is what Gurga would call "too obvious." There needs to be an element of surprise in the relationship between the haiku's parts. This is the spark in the metaphorical sparkplug referenced earlier.

Other arts utilize this spark. Think of the lead characters in any romantic-comedy (a Senator falls for his housekeeper) or literature (the proud, aristocratic Mr. Darcy and the prejudicial, middle class Miss. Bennet). Rap music, for example, does a good job mixing samples from one artist with lyrics from another. In other words, there is a spark between different things. And the spark, driven by the cut, is the engine of a haiku.

If we revisit the "brook" haiku we see that the surprise in the poem is that there is a relationship between a brook and the violets at all. There is not an obvious relationship between these two images without the poet there to point it out. This particular technique brings to mind a quote by R.H. Blyth: "Haiku shows us what we knew all the time, but did not know we knew."[6] The surprise between other types of relationships—contrast, association, etc.—will be different, but still surprising in some way.

It would seem from what has been discussed so far that haiku are simple to write. That all that is involved is putting two images side by side, yet as an editor, I often see haiku that look to be composed of two parts, when in reality they are missing one. I call these attempts 'half haiku.' For example, the following is a half haiku.

summer sun
ripples gold
on the lake

A pretty scene and one that may have sufficiently impressed a poet to write a haiku, but it is really just the single image of a rippling summer sun padded to make it fit three lines. Put another way, it is two lines in search of a third.

[the] summer sun ripples
gold on the lake

Since haiku are by default about relationships, another image or idea is needed to turn it into a haiku. For example:

a scaling knife
the summer sun ripples
gold on the lake

children laughing
the summer sun ripples
gold on the lake

Sometimes the lack of a true cut is disguised by grammatical rearrangement or punctuation. The following haiku uses an em dash to "cut" the poem. Yet, despite the em dash this haiku is still uncut. Bashō allegedly said, "just because a poem uses a kireji (cutting word) doesn't mean that it is cut."[7] The same is true in English-language haiku.

wisteria vine —
its flowers twist
into the iron railing

This kind of uncut poem is different from the 'cinematic' haiku in which a larger image is presented as an establishing shot from which the poet moves in closer for a telling detail, as in Christopher Herold's haiku:[8]

Sierra sunrise ...
pine needles sinking deeper
in a patch of snow

In Herold's haiku, the alpine sunrise is contrasted with something else occurring in the same scene—the pine needles—but most importantly, they are not the same things. In the uncut haiku, there is a repetition of image because the telling detail is too close, or repeats, the establishing shot. There is no tension in the uncut haiku—no surprise—because there is no tension between identical things. And because there is no tension there is very little of interest in the poem.

Looking again at the uncut wisteria haiku, you'll notice that it is really a reworking of the half haiku "a wisteria vine twists / into the iron railing." And like the previous half haiku needs another half to make it a true haiku.

she takes my hand
a wisteria vine twists
into the iron railing

morning breeze
a wisteria vine twists
into the iron railing

If an uncut or half haiku is the cold bowl of porridge in the fairy tale *Goldilocks*, more than one cut could represent the other end of the spectrum—the too-hot bowl. Note the implied grammatical break after each line in the following haiku with two cuts:

setting sun
her red bikini top
sand on my towel

This poem cuts after the first and second lines, leaving the reader with three disparate images. Multiple cuts are often the result of trying to cram as much information as possible into a poem. They suggest a lack of trust in a single image's ability to conjure more than itself. For example, a bikini top suggests more than just its color and fashion, but also the sun and the sea, the smell of suntan lotion, and the boisterous cries of seagulls—all the associations of a summer day at the beach. And while these additional sensations are important to the mood of the poem, they are background to the significant moment the poet is trying to express, and as such should be left inferred rather than explicitly stated. Similarly, the overall effect of multiple cuts and their accompanying multiple images is a loss of focus. The above poem seeks to give a whole scene when it would do better to concentrate on only two of the images from which the whole scene can then be inferred.

setting sun
her red bikini top
taken by a wave

itchy sand
on the beach towel
her red bikini top

The above poems and suggestions are designed with a normative English-language haiku in mind. Yet despite the successful tenure of the well-cut, two-part haiku, writers such as Marlene Mountain have in the past ad-

vocated for what they call the 'one image' haiku. In her essay of the same name she gives examples from two American haikuists.[9]

Sunset dying
on the end of a rusty
beer can ...

Gary Hotam

spring breeze
puffs through the skeleton
of a bird

Raymond Roseliep

In these cases the term "one image" is misleading. In both haiku above, despite the run-thru grammatical structure, there are still two separate images in each haiku:

sunset / beer can
spring breeze / bird skeleton

And importantly, there is enough separation between them to avoid the triteness that Gurga references. Hotham's haiku, for example, is full of interesting comparisons between the two images: the color of the sunset vs. the color of the rust; the shape of the sun vs. the shape of the can; an end to the day vs. the emptiness of the can. The other haiku operates similarly. This duality in each poem raises questions about the label 'one image.' Frankly, if a poet steps back far enough, everything is one image. Even a poem such as Herold's "Sierra sunrise" could be viewed as a 'one image' poem if viewed from outer space.

However, despite the two images in each poem, both poems are missing a formal cut, which naturally raises the question of its necessity. While the main role of the cut is the separation of the poem into its two parts, another role is to slow the reader down. Theorist and poet Hasegawa Kai, in an interview in *Simply Haiku*, explains the concept of *ma*.[10]

> This Japanese word can have a spatial meaning, as in "empty space" or "blank space," a temporal meaning (silence), a psychological meaning, and so on... The "cutting" (kire) of haiku is there to create *ma*.

Earlier I noted that the cut separates the haiku into its two images or elements and asks readers to puzzle-out or intuit their relationship. This is another way of acknowledging that while the poet writes the haiku, the reader completes it. In order to do so, the reader needs a physiological space as well as a temporal pause—what Hasegawa Kai refers to as *ma*. *Ma* is the space between the haiku's two parts, the space created by the cut. This concept is seen in other Asian arts, for example in painting, in which amounts of blank space are left on the canvas for the viewer to utilize. So does the lack of a formal cut, the lack of *ma*, hinder the reader in their completion of these haiku? Certainly, we read through haiku without a formal cut more quickly. We may also not notice the importance of each image because they are not placed in isolation. These may be reasons to revisit such formats.

Returning to the poems above, it is worth noting that each of the images in Mountain's examples—sunset and beer can, for example—are interesting in their own right. Not a claim that can be convincingly made of the iron railing in the half haiku "a wisteria vine twists / into the iron railing" discussed earlier.

A question might be whether a clearly cut haiku—one that had the aforementioned surprise—could be made of the 'one image' poems without too much tweaking. For example, of Hotham's poem.

> Sunset dying—
> the crushed end
> of a rusty beer can

I don't see much difference between this adaptation and Herold's cinematic haiku earlier. Looked at this way, perhaps a true 'one-image' poem is one where a scene or moment is winnowed down until there is nothing but a single engaging image, one without any other engaging component, such as the one-line poem by Tash Adams in the previous issue of *Modern Haiku*.[11]

> bait fish fill my reflection

Clearly, the second image of a reflection is not strong enough to sustain the poem on its own, unlike the image of the bait fish in the bucket which is interesting enough to warrant additional attention, so I suggest we have found the level necessary to call this particular poem 'one image.' Since I published it I clearly believe it has value as a poem, yet I can't help but wonder if it wouldn't benefit from another image or idea. Of course this raises the question of whether it is a haiku or not. I think a good case could be made to disqualify it on definitional grounds since it has no cut. An additional poem from Mountain's essay falls into this same category. Cor van den Heuvel's well-known:[12]

the shadow in the folded napkin

This poem is equally interesting and has much to offer through additional readings, but much like in the previous poem, the image "the shadow" isn't strong enough to stand on its own. I would suggest this is a half haiku as well. Of course, the poem most cited as a 'one image' haiku is another by van den Heuvel.[13]

tundra

I'll assert that I find the 'one image' designation questionable even in this case. The poem would not be as successful if it was published on a page tight with other poems, or even as presented here between lines of text. Its success is through its combination with the rest of an empty page. I would argue that the surrounding emptiness qualifies as a second image. I would even go so far as to label this a haiku.

That said, an interesting subset of successful one image haiku are 'riddle' haiku which rely on ordering and misdirection to succeed, although the label 'one image' may again be misleading. In riddle haiku the first two lines describe something that is revealed in the final line. An example is Karen Sohne's poem:[14]

between cities
on the interstate
so many stars

The first two lines of the haiku pose a question: what is between cities on the interstate? The cut between lines two and three gives the reader time to postulate their own theories. Perhaps gas stations, fast food restaurants, miles and miles of emptiness … any number of things. The third line offers a surprising answer.

If this poem was reordered to remove the surprise ending it would be a simple sentence without a cut.

so many stars
between cities
on the interstate

In light of the previous discussion, it is questionable whether cities or even stars are interesting enough to sustain the poem on their own, which would make it a true one image poem—or half haiku, i.e. "so many stars between / cities on the interstate."

Below is another example of a riddle haiku with just the first half shown to better illustrate the sleight of hand. A haiku by Joanne Morcom.[15]

surrounding
the quiet bungalow

Again, any number of things could answer this question: a rainforest, morning birds, or ugly patio furniture. The answer?

surrounding
the quiet bungalow
yellow crime scene tape

A powerful juxtaposition, but again, in a reordered form it would probably be a half haiku. As is, it is successful because of reordering and the introduction of a cut. Because so many things come to mind after reading the initial two lines, I am hesitant to call them true 'one image' haiku. They succeed as haiku because the first two lines are so open to other interpretations, other images, which like it or not, are present in the reading. But this may be splitting hairs.

The cut is a powerful tool, one that is integral to haiku. It provides the spark, or surprise, between two images. This spark may be one of astonishment, shock, or simple recognition. Considering haiku's origins in sharing it is the duty of the poet to share surprising things—to avoid triteness. Evaluating each potential haiku in light of its cut supports that goal.

Notes

[1] Reichhold, Jane. *Writing and Enjoying Haiku: A Hands-on Guide*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2002.

[2] Reichhold, Jane. "Fragment and Phrase Theory." AHA Poetry website. http://ahapoetry.com/AHI%20frag%20art.html. Accessed March 4, 2017.

[3] Drevniok, Betty. *Aware—A Haiku Primer*. Bellingham, Washington: Portal Publications, no year.

[4] Kawamoto, Koji. *The Poetics of Japanese Verse*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2000.

[5] Gurga, Lee. *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*. Lincoln, Illinois: Modern Haiku Press, 2003.

[6] Blyth, R.H. *Haiku*. Japan: Hokuseido Press, 1981.

[7] Carley, John. "Renku: A Snippet of Snails." New Zealand Poetry Society website. https://poetrysociety.org.nz/affiliates/haiku-nz/haiku-poems-articles/archived-articles/renku-a-snippet-of-snails/. Accessed March 4, 2017.

[8] Herold, Christopher. *A Path in the Garden*. Lake Oswego, Oregon: Katsura Press, 2000.

[9] Mountain, Marlene. "One Image Haiku." Personal website. http://www.marlenemountain.org/essays/essay_oneimage.html. Accessed March 4, 2017.

[10] Wilson, Robert. "An Interview with Hasegawa Kai ." *Simply Haiku* Vol. 6.3. http://simplyhaiku.com/SHv6n3/features/Kai.html. Accesses March 4, 2017.

[11] Adams, Tash. *Modern Haiku* 48.1

[12] van den Heuvel, Cor. *The Haiku Anthology*. 3rd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999, 232.

[13] van den Heuvel, Cor. *The Haiku Anthology*. 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974.

[14] van den Heuvel, 185.

[15] Ibid., 127.