A Hair's Breadth: Toward a Consideration of Contemporary Haibun

by Keith Polette

> *"Poetry, or more generally the arts, acknowledges sense and perception, as well as emotions and sentiment, to be the most important moments of experience."*
>
> —Nishitani Keiji, "Emptiness and Sameness"

In describing the act of poetic creation, Bashō wrote: "When composing a verse let there not be a hair's breadth separating your mind from what you write; composition of a poem must be done in an instant, like a woodcutter felling a huge tree or a swordsman leaping at a dangerous enemy." In this description, Bashō is pointing out that the right kind of attitude—the right kind of "sense and perception"—is necessary to write so that the writer and the written are seamlessly realized. This attitude that is able to rapidly synthesize opposites is available to writers who, through practice, can free themselves from the confines of the overly rational mind that divides without making distinctions. Moreover, the kind of mind that Bashō is talking about is also one that is highly skilled in artistry, whether it is tree cutting, swordsmanship, or writing. This kind of mindful artistry allows for the merger of inner and outer experiences so that, for example, there is no distinction between the tree-cutter and the cutting, the swordman and the sword strike, or the writer and the writing. In this way, Bashō is describing the manner in which effective writing springs from the orgainic action of the "intuitive mind" and not from the calculating machinations of the "thinking mind."

As such, when considering the "skillful" nature of the art of haibun, especially as it is currently being written, it might be helpful, as starting point, to recall, what *haibun* and *haiku* mean—*haibun*: *hai*, meaning skill or playful ability, and *bun*, meaning sentences; and *haiku*: *hai*, meaning skill or playful ability, and *ku*, meaning verse. In this way, we recognize that the haibun is a prosimetric form which is grounded in the skillful and dynamic interplay between well-crafted sentences and carefully constructed verse.

To investigate what constitutes "skillful sentences" in a haibun, we might look to the prose poem as a reference. In his essay from *Frogpond* 45.1, "Ways of Looking: Haibun at the Cusp of the Covid Period," Judson

Evans writes, "For me, the contemporary prose poem asserts a useful model for haiku prose in haibun. For the prose poem, the sentence, rather than the line, is the basic unit, and the integrity and variety of sentences and tensile strength of the imagistic and auditory bonds is primary." Here Evans makes important points about how sentences, skillfully composed and carefully arranged, transport more than denotative content. Such sentences deliver rich literary goods: bonded organically, words and images reach beyond themselves to become unified in sound and sense; in this way, the sentences in a haibun offer what Flannery O'Connor referred to as an "anagogical" vision because of their capacity to reveal multiple layers of reality simultaneously: the known and the unknown, the conscious and the unconscious, and the object and its emotional reference. And here we might extend the idea from William Carlos Williams that there are "no ideas but in things," to there being no deep (transpersonal) emotions but in things.

Echoing these notions, prose-poet James Harms, in his essay, "'Goodtime Jesus' and Other Sorts of Prose Poems," writes, "When [poets] banish the line break, the language retains its essential poetry: the character of the image and the coordination of phrases (the musical interaction of syntactical units). . . . As Robert Haas has suggested, the tonal qualities of a sentence are very different from those of a line or phrase." Like Evans, Harms is suggesting that the "essential poetry" of a prose poem, and in our case, the prose part of the haibun, resides in the "character of the image" and "the tonal qualities of the sentence." Such qualities are often made manifest in the following: *rhythm* via the musical intersection of simple, compound, and compound/complex constructions; *sound* via the use of consonance, assonance, euphony, cacophony, alliteration, and onomatopoeia; and *image* via the use of concrete language, simile, metaphor, personification, and hyperbole. (NB: These qualities, which do not comprise an exhaustive catalogue, are derived from my observations as to what often constitutes effectively written haibun prose; they are not, moreover, intended to be prescriptive or directive.)

Additionally, one important role of the tonal and image aspects of haibun prose is to provide the poetic scaffold for the reader to be able

to participate in, and thus experience, a linguistically based emotional resonance. It might be argued that emotional resonance rests at the heart of haibun, and that such a resonance, whether subtle or dazzling, provides the access point for readers to open their imaginations to that which the haibun is pointing to, so that they might, as James Hillman writes in *Healing Fiction*, "see through" the surface of the literal or the denotative to the unseen level of the metaphoric; that is, to be moved beyond measure to discern the deep image in the manifest image, and in the deep image to recognize the archetypal aspects of themselves to which they may have only had hints or intimations. Accordingly, in *Mysterium Conjunctionis* C. G. Jung writes:

> The process of coming to terms with the Other in us is well worth while, because in this way we get to know aspects of our nature which we would not allow anybody else to show us and which we ourselves would never have admitted.

Through the experience of emotional resonance in haibun prose, readers may indeed be positioned to begin to "come to terms with the Other" in themselves. For skillfully crafted haibun prose, especially if it is rooted in the realm of *wabi sabi*, will offer readers an entry into the world beyond the confines of the comfy sofa so that they may set foot on their own narrow road to the interior domains of their being.

Regarding the participatory nature of poetry, Octavio Paz writes in *The Bow and the Lyre*:

> The poem is just this: a possibility, something that is only animated by the contact with a reader or a listener. There is only one note common to all poems, without which it would never be poetry: participation. . . . The poem is a work that is always unfinished, always ready to be completed and lived by a new reader.

In a sense, readers are co-creators with the author of the haibun, because, as they read and respond, they are able to live an imaginal world that is expressed in language. In this way, readers can participate in a world that is distinctly not their own because they have been moved by the haibun's emotional resonance.

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Equally important to the skillfully composed sentences in a haibun is the haiku and its vital relationship to the prose. Here, for example, is a selection from the opening passage from Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Interior*:

> I patched my torn trousers and changed the cord on my bamboo hat. To strengthen my legs for the journey I had moxa burned on my shins. By then I could think of nothing but the moon at Matsushima. When I sold my cottage and moved to Sampû's villa, to stay until I started on my journey, I hung this poem on a post in my hut:
>
> ***kusa no to mo / sumikawaru yo zo / hina no ie***
>
> Even a thatched hut
> May change with a new owner
> Into a doll's house. (*Translated by Donald Keene*)

It has become customary to consider the relationship of the haiku to the prose as one of "link and shift." In this way, the haiku can be seen to operate as a linguistic close-up of an image that is, by means of an epiphanic association, poetically related to the panoramic field of the prose; in other words, the image of the haiku "links" to the prose but then, in a disjunctive move, shifts away from it. Bashō's haiku certainly functions in this manner: the first two lines "link" to the content of the prose denotatively, while the last line "shifts" away in a metaphoric (and almost hyperbolic) manner. Even though there is a clear "link and shift" between Bashō's prose and the haiku, the shift is "no wider than a hair's breadth" because the haiku and the prose are so intimately and intuitively connected.

Just as the sentences of the haibun are best realized through the movement of the intuitive mind, so too is the creation of the haiku. In *Three Books on the Art of the Haiku*, Hattori Doho, writes: "When a poet who has always trained his mind along the way of the Haiku applies himself to the object, the color of his mind 'grows' into a poem. In the case of the poet who lacks that training, nothing grows into a poem;

as a consequence, he has to 'make' a poem out of his self." Doho's statement can be seen as one that differentiates the "intuitive mind" from the "thinking mind" and how depending on the "thinking mind" for poetic writing will lead to shallow linguistic constructions. For haiku to have the "hair's breath" quality, they should usher forth from a mind "trained along the way of the Haiku" so that they "grow" naturally into a poetic expression. As such, the haiku should be organically linked to the content of the prose but should shift away in an intuitive manner, in order to present an associative image that carries the distillation and clarification of the haibun's emotional resonance.

Three Haibun Collections

I would like to examine three recently published collections of haibun in order to discuss the manner in which their respective authors have gone about crafting effective haibun, ones in which the prose and the haiku are skillfully devised to deliver a strong emotional resonance and, in so doing, reveal the workings of the "intuitive mind."

I. *Fragmentation* by Sean O'Connor

I begin with Sean O'Connor's *Fragmentation* since it received the 2022 HSA Merit Book Award for Excellence in Haibun Writing and because it is a splendid collection, a rich and wonderful mélange, one that demonstrates a high degree of literary skill and emotional depth. As such, *Fragmentation* has much to offer us. Employing haibun, haiku, and zuihitsu, *Fragmentation* is, as Sean O'Connor writes, "a series of meditations on dementia and the dynamics of memory." Indeed, the three sections in this collection focus, to a great degree, on his father's affliction with dementia and on O'Connor's memories of and reactions to it; but beyond that, O'Connor explores the fragmented nature of existence itself and how episodes of suffering punctuate all experience. For instance, he writes:

> Suffering is unavoidable. We may enjoy periods in which we ourselves are not suffering, but we are constantly surrounded by the suffering of others. Even if we live in isolation, and pay no attention to news of the world, we may step outside to find a wounded bird at our doorstep.

Here we recall one of the central precepts of Buddhism: that life is predicated on suffering (or dissatisfaction), on impermanence, and on a conditional state of being. And what better image to represent this precept than that of a wounded bird. For are we all not birds that have been wounded by life, irrespective of what we have done to deserve or to instigate it? And are not our attempts to transcend the conditions of physicality and the bonds of temporality always met with some level of dissatisfaction? Moreover, do we not, at some point, need to face our own insufficiencies and our own wounded mortalities and to "depend on the kindness of strangers," as Tennessee Williams famously wrote in *A Streetcar Named Desire*?

To illustrate one of the early access points of suffering in *Fragmentation*, O'Connor opens with a haibun that describes the stroke that hit his father. Here is the first part of "Windows":

> He is seated in his local pub where he had gone for help when he felt something wrong. His left arm is limp. A paramedic asks me to confirm that the left side of his face is drooped. He looks startled and helpless and there is an atmosphere of unstated fear and concern among the bar's patrons. Among his friends.
>
> speeding ambulance
> through its tinted windows
> a waning moon

Here is the opening of an effective haibun, one that could easily be read backwards, since the haiku contains the emotional and imaginal seeds of the prose and the prose serves as an efficacious amplification of the haiku. Particularly impressive in the prose section are how the sentences operate to describe multiple layers of suffering. First, the four full sentences in the haibun contain

the same subject/predicate construction, and in so doing, create a kind of regulated rhythm, one that may lead the reader toward an expectation of a clear closure (and thus, the intuitive mind of the author). This rhythm, however, is severely disrupted in the last line, which is a prepositional phrase, that is, a sentence fragment, which refers us back to the title of the collection. In this phrase, the reader's experience of the first four sentences is suddenly and unexpectedly fragmented. Moreover, by only using third person pronouns—he and his—to refer to his father, O'Connor is subtly creating a linguistic and relational distance between the two of them, one that is almost objective, and one that will be painfully realized after his father suffers a stroke, and even later, as his dementia causes a literal disconnection when the father does not recognize the son.

Additionally, the haiku contains a coal-into-diamond pressure, which demonstrates a unity and coherence of image and emotion. When writing about Bashō's famous haiku of the crow perching on a branch on an autumn evening, for instance, Kenneth Yasuda in "'Approach to Haiku' and 'Basic Principles'," writes that each of Bashō's three lines "have the same feeling, and we are moved by and impressed with this common emotion existing among [them]." In O'Connor's haiku, we see the same kind of "feeling" and "common emotion" existing among the lines. First, the juxtaposition between "the speeding ambulance" and the *kigo* of the "waning moon" suggests a coordinated disjunction of images: fast and slow. What is remarkable is how the "tinted windows" of the speeding ambulance serve as the portals through which one is able to discern the moon in its wane, which is to say that through "tinted" speed, one is able to catch sight of a distant, fading light. Central to the haiku, then, is a sense of occlusion: tinted windows and waning moon suggest a diminution of light and of vision, while the ambulance itself serves as the conveyance of actual suffering, and by implication, the speed at which suffering can be delivered upon any of us. In this way, the haiku carefully expresses, through the tight interconnection of its lines, the sense of shock, of loss, of sadness, and of the slow (natural) fading of reflected/reflecting consciousness.

Later in the collection, we find "Holy Island," which could be said to function in a contrapuntal way to "Windows":

> The edge of Lough Derg, shortly after daybreak. Over there, Holy Island. Mist in distant trees. Standing there with my dying friend. Final stage. Two reasons to live—at most.
>
> The past few days he is feeling well. Rises early. Makes the most of every day. Every minute.
>
> The water flat calm. Stoop down. Pick up. Arm back. Release.
>
> the arc of a stone
> the moment as it peaks
> that moment

Let us begin with the haiku in "Holy Island" and the image of the "arc of a stone." In this image, we are presented with something hard, obdurate, simple, and old that is in movement—and here we cannot help but think intertextually of Charles Simic's "Stone" with its rich interiority and imaginal suggestiveness. O'Connor's haiku also focuses on time, on a "moment," on, perhaps, a "haiku moment" where the perception of external phenomena reveals a deeper reality, and where, for a moment, the perceiver and the perceived become one. Moreover, this double mentioning of "moment" should alert us to the notion of the brevity of time, and how, perhaps, life itself is but an "arc" between moments of realization, even if those moments are necessarily fragmentary.

Just as "Windows" contains one sentence fragment, "Holy Island" contains only one complete sentence, and in this way, the two haibun operate in a kind of yin/yang manner, each being the structural opposite of the other. Not only do the sentence fragments operate to speed up the rhythm in "Holy Island" as staccato surges of language, but they also metaphorically suggest an abbreviated span of life, since they serve as breathless, fragmentary emblems of the friend's life in its "final stage." In this way, the deployment and accumulation of rapid-fire sentence fragments achieve a powerful

effect, which is the existential dramatization of the brevity of life, and of the way in which, like a stone plopping into a lake (or a frog splashing into a pond), the habituated awareness of existence is punctuated by a swift and sudden awakening, one that is literally breaking surfaces. The sentence fragments terminate with "Pick up. Arm back. Release," and while we understand that an actual stone is being thrown, we also see that the stone emblemizes a life that is also being thrown into the "calm waters" of time. Which is to say that the prose section does not end with the angst of a sullen resignation, but instead with a deliberate action, one that may indicate a kind of freedom couched in choice and in the ability to "release" oneself from momentary, earthly attachments.

As these three examples suggest, *Fragmentation* is a collection of carefully crafted writings, all of which demonstrate a sensitivity to language, to rhythm, to imagery, and to the dramatization of perceptions that reveal the kind of aesthetic that Kenneth Yasuda describes as one "in which the words which created the experience and the experience itself can become one." Readers will find the writings in this collection to be well-wrought, deeply moving, and worth reading more than once.

II. *Fragile Horizons* by Diana Webb

Comprised of haibun, "braided" haibun, and haibun novelarettes, Diana Webb's collection is an ambitious one that attempts variously to compress, extend, and hybridize the haibun form. The title of this collection serves as an indication of the themes and emotions that inform the haibun, so we can expect to see an assortment of "fragile horizons": places in which opposites (e.g., earth and sky) converge and which are easily broken (emotionally tenuous). And we also notice that this collection is richly allusive. Webb refers, either directly or indirectly, to such figures as Tennyson, Blake, Hopkins, Frost, Degas, Chopin, Williams, Debussy, Heraclitus, Turner, Saint-Saens, Rothko, Keats, and Shakespeare; by doing so, she alerts us to the web of intertextuality in which her haibun are situated, one that offers a strong artistic resonance and writerly intuition.

Many of the haibun in the collection are compressed, some being no more than one sentence in length. This type of compression brings to mind the minimalist poetry of Kay Ryan and Jonathon Greene, whose poetry offers suggestions and hints rather than descriptions or enactments. For instance, "Infant Light" is grounded in such suggestiveness:

> I am a child. My first identity. My long and lingering identity.
>
> longest day
> permission to stay up
> to watch the sunset

The haiku offers a fragile horizon, the "sunset" of the "longest day," and the speaker's need for permission to watch it, a need which is articulated in the liminal space between the first and third lines of the haiku. In this liminal space, the speaker seeks permission to enter into and to hold a tension of opposites (a long field of light and its diminution), hoping, possibly, for a synthesis of the two, which could result in the establishment of a new, less fragile frame of mind. One then wonders: Is the permission being sought from parental figures? From the speaker's deeper self? Moreover, when considering the declarative sentence and the two fragments that follow it, we also wonder if the speaker is re-imagining herself as a child, locating herself in childhood to recover and transform a fragile state of being. Or might the speaker be recognizing what Jung called the "divine child" archetype, that transpersonal force which has the ability to shape identity, especially if the initial sense of self is "first," "long and lingering"—something that is simultaneously primary and enduring, something that leads to the vast horizon of possibilities, however fragile? Since the prose section of "Infant Light" is so compressed, we also wonder: Does the minimal use of prose work effectively with the haiku to establish a rhythm, an image, and an emotional resonance? Would added lyrical description provide a greater resonance? These are questions that could serve as the basis for an engaging discussion. When considering the minimalistic haibun prose in this collection, perhaps it comes down to a matter of taste rather than judgement—because Diana Webb is a fine writer and is clearly making informed choices about her use of language.

The collection also offers "braided" haibun, ones in which lines of a haiku are interspersed with those of the prose. Here is an example called "Triveni":

From where I'm sitting three roads meet.

Towards the sea

a wave

Towards the hill

reaches its peak

Towards the ancient town with its view of the landmark spire.

ghost of a sunken church

Appropriately, the prose section has a tripartite structure made evident through the repeated use of the word "towards." And in the lines that complete them, we see three kinds of horizons, which may suggest three fragile perspectives. The haiku, in italics, is spatially expanded, broadening into wide silence (*ma*) before being sounded in the next line. The braided aspect of this haibun is visually arresting, causing the reader to slow down and consider the relationships between the alternating lines of prose and haiku, waiting until the end before attempting to find or create closure. When I first read this poem, I thought of Paul Fleischman's *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*, because "Triveni" seems most appropriate for two distinct voices, one that would read the prose, the other that would read the haiku. In this way, listeners (if the poem were to be rendered orally) would have a clear sense of how to differentiate the prose from the haiku and how the two parts of the haibun might function together to convey an image and a potential emotional resonance. Without the benefit of being recited aloud with two voices, however, a "braided" haibun (regardless of its authorship), because its configuration appeals primarily to the eye rather than the ear, runs the risk of restricting itself to being read only silently, which is a solitary, rather than a communal activity.

Fragile Horizons also contains three haibun novelarettes, each of which offers an extended narrative through a loose assortment of haibun. Even though these haibun novelarettes seemed to be structurally disconnected from the other haibun in the collection, I did find them to be effective, because they were robust in content, they were imaginative in their inception, and they allowed for the organic placement of more than one voice. For instance, in "An Order of Words," Webb presents a fictitious young writer named Myrtle Smythe, who, we are told, "really wants to impress her teachers [at her convent school] with her writing." As such, Myrtle writes haibun about many of the Sisters who teach at the school; at the conclusion of each haibun, we see a written response from the Sister who has read it. Here is a splendid example, entitled, "Sister Mary Alban":

> She points to the first letter on the chart. A for Apple. What other letter could it be? This nun is young and rosy cheeked and shows us the fruit that began the fall.
>
> One has to be the first to drop.
>
> autumn term
> her gift for the teacher
> unripe and tart
>
> *I think you may be offering this one to appease me after your last somewhat unfortunate piece.*
>
> *I like the link between the different kinds of fall and also the way the last line of your haiku suggests the nature of some of your work. B++*
>
> ***Note:*** *You may have missed an opportunity here to touch upon our local martyr from whom she took her name and the beautiful cathedral that stands in his honour.*

Not only does the haiku work well to establish a context for the haibun, but it also furnishes us with a potent emotional resonance, especially in the juxtaposition of "autumn term" and "unripe and

tart," as one generally associates unripe and tart with immature apples not ready for picking, as they are apples that one might find in the fall. In this way, Webb has created tension between the images in the first and third line, a tension that, it would seem, is the actual gift for the teacher. In this way, the haiku suggests that the speaker is offering a subtle sense of rebellion to the teacher. The prose section of the haibun would seem to bear this out, suggesting that Myrtle has positioned herself, though an act of post-Edenic insurrection, to be the first to fall.

In *Fragile Horizons*, the intuitive mind blends the opposites of old and new. In this rich collection, Diana Webb explores the fragile horizons of artistry, of music, of dance, of childhood, and of sacred spaces. The variations of style and tone throughout call to mind that now famous dictum by Ezra Pound in the "Cantos": "Tching prayed on the mountain and / wrote MAKE IT NEW / on his bath tub / Day by day make it new / cut underbrush, / pile the logs / keep it growing." Like Pound, Webb is working to make haibun "new," to do the backbreaking work of cutting underbrush and piling logs so as to keep the artistic sensibility "growing," and in so doing, to assure that haibun does not pull away from the long breath of tradition while also offering it new ways of configuring itself.

III. *Africa, Buddha* by Matthew Caretti

Just as Sean O'Connor's *Fragmentation* offers a Buddhistically oriented account of his father's dementia and of other characters who wrestle with suffering, Matthew Caretti's *Africa, Buddha* offers a similarly directed rendering of his time teaching at the orphanages in Malawi and Lesotho after having left a rigorous monastic life. The haibun in the collection, most of which are the linguistic equivalent of a monk's cell, open the reader to new worlds of experience from a perspective that is stripped bare of expectation, but that retains the tang and density of immediacy.

What first struck me as I began reading *Africa, Buddha* was the sparse nature of the language. Notable for its (deliberate) lack of lyrical and figurative flourishes, the language throughout the collection is

clear, straightforward, direct, frequently arriving, almost hastily, in sentence fragments. For example, here is the opening haibun, "Following as Effect from Cause":

> After the monastery. After a year of pilgrimage. After a month on this final retreat. Knowing now how to not know. Plan. Expect. No money. No job. But an email from Malawi. Six years since the last. Dated weeks ago. An old friend. Also a former monastic. On the possibility of meaningful work there. Orphans. The offer of a ticket.
>
> ursa poised
> to scoop a bit of sea
> driftwood knots

The language is perfectly suited to the haibun's form and purpose. For as we read, we feel a growing sense that the language is presented almost like sporadic thoughts that arise during meditation practice: things to observe in passing, but not things to which one should form attachments. In this way, this haibun is an example of Bashō's notion of "hair's breadth" or intuitive mind in action. And the haiku mirrors this notion in its image of "poised" action. Just as the speaker in the haibun is poised to act, "to scoop" up experience, he waits for something to drift to him, in this case "an email" and "the offer of a ticket," in other words, a calling. Additionally, Caretti has presented a potent haibun that demonstrates a kind of instantaneously realized text which places the speaker and the speaker's thoughts in a relationship no wider than a hair's breadth.

The meditative quality of the language informs the haibun throughout the collection. In each of the haibun, we become cognizant of a speaker who is in the moment, but who is not of the moment, something which reminds us of Ralph Waldo Emerson's key idea of a mind that works by making "distinctions without division." Which is to say that the haibun here portray a speaker who seems to be fully immersed in the experiences he describes but who also does not seem to be overly attached to a need to direct the outcomes; by being able to sustain this tension of opposites, the speaker (and by extension, author) makes manifest the dynamics of the intuitive mind.

The spare language also works in "Africa Cup," a haibun in the second section of the collection, to suggest a transformation.

> Market day. Some of the older children and I venture beyond the main gate. Through macadamia estate. Down across the stream. Then up to the village beside the main road. At the trading post, the tinkerer's shop springs to life. Remnants of a radio. An old man connects a faulty wire. Tunes to some distant pitch. The children—and I—stare into the loudspeaker.
>
> play-by-play
> the static after
> a missed PK

Reminiscent of "the quest" or the mono-myth that Joseph Campbell articulated in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the speaker and the children "venture beyond the main gate," and here we see that they are passing through a liminal space to the world beyond. And while the actual goal of the quest on "market day" is not overtly stated (though we might assume it is food), the discovered goal becomes the old radio that is brought unexpectedly to life, causing the speaker and children to "stare into the loudspeaker." In this act of staring, the speaker and children are so arrested by what they hear that an implicit experience of synesthesia is suggested, one where the sounds of the "remnants of a radio" are suddenly visible, able to be "stared at." And yet, as the haiku suggests, such a transformative experience is only temporary, where the play-by-play of life is replaced by static when something essential is aimed for but missed.

Whereas "Africa Cup" draws the speaker and the children into the world of the market and to the epiphanic discover of sound-as-sight, "The Rains of Malawi," which appears later in the collection, opens an interiority to the speaker and children, one lit with occasional illuminations:

> The first clouds gather on the horizon. Then the blotting of the setting sun. The wind and sudden cool. Into a slow repose as the rains begin to speak in sonorous tongues.

On the tin roof
A murmur
Of evening prayers

A change in cadence. From trickle to torrent. The children and I seek shelter within the shelter. Move away from the now steady drips. A bucket here. Saucer there. Relight the damp wick of the candle.

night thunder
the way the spider
avoids the puddle

The opening prose section operates, on one level, as an extended *kigo*, which does the double work of setting the atmospheric and seasonal scene while simultaneously establishing the subtextual, or emotional, disposition of the speaker, which can be seen as a metaphoric movement from the day world (a habitual state of consciousness) into an attitude of "slow repose" caused by the recognition of the rain's "sonorous tongues." Such a move, as the first haiku indicates, brings the speaker into an organic sacred space where the rain on the "tin roof" is but one kind of softly uttered evening prayer.

In the second section of the haibun, we see "a change of cadence" because the sonorous tongue of rain has changed into a torrent of tongues, one that drives the speaker and children to "seek shelter within the shelter." Interestingly, the twin use of "shelter" can be seen, on a metalinguistic level, as the movement away from the actuality of the denotative and into the safety of the connotative. Since this haibun bristles with references to voice and to words—sonorous tongues, evening prayers, change of cadence—the discovery of shelter within the shelter works well to relocate the sensibility of the speaker and to invite the reader to become reoriented in an interior space. In this space, the voice of the rain still "drips" and a candle needs continually to be relit. Such an image suggests that in the interior space that serves as a temporary shelter, the consciousness that operates there does so only occasionally—and does so with continual attention and effort.

Moreover, this section of the haibun reminds us of a poem by Wallace Stevens. And even though the poem is separated from "The Rains of Malawi" by time and distance, it offers what Makoto Ueda in "Bashō on the Art of Haiku" calls a poetic "reverberation" where the energy and imagery from one poem reverberates in the energy and imagery of another. Here is the final stanza from Stevens's "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour": "Out of the same light, out of the central mind, / We make a dwelling in the evening air, / In which being there together is enough." It is uncanny how Caretti's haibun reverberates with Stevens's poem, how both speakers seem to share "a central mind" and "make a dwelling in the evening air" where being together is, we can imagine, enough light to sustain them, both—especially in Stevens's plural sense of self (akin, in one way, to Jung's notion that the ego is always in orbit around the Self) and in the way the speaker and the children in the haibun work together harmoniously, without need of distinction, to place a bucket and a saucer to catch the drip and then to "Relight the damp wick of the candle."

Conclusion

As is evident from these three vibrant collections, haibun writing in English has entered a stage of fecundity, one where, quite often, there does not seem to be "a hair's breadth" between the writer and what was written, as each blends into each. For instance, in *Fragmentation*, Sean O'Connor has created exquisitely crafted haibun, in which he clearly synthesizes the opposites of form and function, so much so that it is easy to forget that one is reading any kind of form at all, so natural, organic, and intuitive do the writings in his collection appear. In *Fragile Horizons*, Diana Webb has brought her considerable talents to bear in presenting a variety of haibun that manifest the synthetic essence of the intuitive dance between prose and haiku. And in *Africa, Buddha*, Matthew Caretti offers a strong narrative account of his various experiences by finding a clear, intuitive balance between what to articulate and what to leave to silence. The three writers here aptly demonstrate that the haibun form is capable of offering myriad ways for what Nishitani Keiji in

"The Space of Poetry" calls "the deep mobility of the imagination" to manifest itself in new and dynamic modes of expression, modes that remained rooted in the tradition of Japanese haibun while also being situated in the rich world of Western arts.

Works Cited & Purchase Details:

1. **Fragmentation** haibun by Sean O'Connor (Alba Publishing, Uxbridge, UK: 2021). 82 pages, 5.75" x 8.25". Four-color card covers, perfect bound. ISBN 9781-912773-41-1. 15€ from *https://seanwriter.com.*
2. **Fragile Horizons** haibun by Diana Webb (The Magic Pen Press, Ipswich, Suffolk, UK: 2022). 113 pages, 6" x 8.25". Glossy color covers, perfect softbound. ISBN: 978-1-8380312-4-4. Email the author for ordering information: *dianawebb46@gmail.com.*
3. **Africa, Buddha** haibun by Matthew Caretti (Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2022). Unpaginated, 4.25" x 6.5". Glossy color covers, perfect softbound. ISBN: 978-1-947271-89-0. $20 from *https://redmoonpress.com.*

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