

## **Imagining Haiku Narrators**

*by Randy Brooks*

### Part 2 – why, who

As discussed in Part 1 of this essay, the imagined haiku narrator shifts depending upon at least five main implied questions: (1) where are they speaking? (2) what are they speaking about? (3) how are they speaking? (4) why are they speaking? and (5) who is speaking? Each haiku provides clues to help readers imagine answers to these questions. Some haiku only hint at one of these questions and others hint at all five. In this second part, I will briefly discuss the last two questions. Haiku writers play with these various questions to provide clues that help readers imagine a narrator. I will conclude this essay with a brief synopsis of how haiku narrators prompt appropriate collaborative reader responses.

#### (4) Why are they speaking?

Theories of narrative techniques often discuss ways that writers portray the consciousness of the narrator. Writers share the outer and inner perceptions and values of the narrator as well as various states of being. Readers usually accept the narrator's voice as a reliable witness of their experiences and thoughts. This is sometimes called trusting the narrator's "stream of consciousness" and accepting their observations and feelings as genuine which is the usual way we read a haiku. The narrator's words represent not just the events or images of the haiku, but also their implied subjective or lyrical response to that situation.

However, sometimes writers employ an unreliable narrator to tell a story that may be warped, biased, or deliberately twisted in ways that make it difficult or uncomfortable. Readers resist or do not want to see things the way the narrator sees them. We do not want to relate or imagine things from a murderer's

or abuser's perspective. We don't mind viewing them from a distance, but don't want to imagine being in that narrator's shoes (or consciousness). Who wants to imagine being sexist, racist, misogynistic, hateful, or someone incapable of making sense? But sometimes art takes us to those uncomfortable places as well as to moments of beauty, contemplation, appreciation, and love. Dissonance may come in the form of an unreliable or repulsive narrator.

When we consider why the haiku narrator is speaking, we are asking about their motives and purposes for telling us this haiku story. Why do they care? We will consider three states of consciousness in haiku we usually relate to and easily accept: (1) the personal stream of consciousness; (2) the dreamlike stream of subconsciousness; and (3) states of contemplation or prayer. We will conclude this section with an examination of haiku narrators who may make us necessarily uncomfortable as we consider social issues and trauma.

#### *Narrators as a Personal Stream of Consciousness*

Many haiku are written in the first-person voice as a stream of consciousness, whether the writer uses first-person pronouns or simply implies a first-person perspective.

all day long  
i feel its weight  
the unworn necklace

Roberta Beary, *Haiku in English*, 206

In this award-winning haiku, Beary's narrator is a personal voice sharing her inner thoughts. While the haiku appears to be a spontaneous realization, it moves us back in time through the whole day. The necklace must be a special one that is usually worn. But on this day it is unworn. Why is it unworn? Has something changed in a relationship? Was it a gift from someone who is no

longer appreciated? Did the necklace hold a photograph locket or a religious symbol? We don't know. All we know is that this must be the first day that the narrator has not worn the necklace. The narrator says, "i feel its weight,' like a phantom limb. This is a wonderful haiku about the consciousness of loss, of missing the necklace and whatever it represents to the narrator. The lowercase "i" is appropriate. Without the necklace the narrator feels diminished, not as fully themselves as before.

Waterlilies . . .  
in a moment he'll ask me  
what I'm thinking

Alexis Rotella, *Global Haiku*, 88

From this haiku I imagine a couple at an art museum viewing a painting of waterlilies by Monet. It could be his famous painting that brings sky and blossoms and trees together on the surface of the water, without the typical landscape horizon. Or the couple could be at a botanical garden viewing actual waterlilies. The second and third lines give us the narrator's stream of consciousness. She is thinking about what he is thinking. Ironically, she says "in a moment he'll ask me / what I'm thinking" as if we can only enjoy Monet's art or the beautiful waterlilies by talking about them. It's fun speculating when we enter into the stream of consciousness of a narrator.

frost on the birdbath  
I comb  
my graying hair

Selma Stefanile, *Midwest Haiku Anthology*, 99

In this haiku, the narrator starts with an observation outdoors — "frost on the birdbath." Frost is a common topic in haiku, representing the beauty of something so ephemeral. Then Stefanile's

narrator turns her attention to what she is doing: “I comb / my graying hair.” The comparison of graying hair and frost implies that she accepts growing old and understands that her life, in some ways, is like the frost.

after midnight  
getting some of my thoughts  
into the lifeboat

John Stevenson, *My Red*, 74

The narrator in this haiku seems to be talking to himself in the middle of a worrisome night. Unable to sleep, the narrator says he is “getting some of my thoughts / into the lifeboat” which leaves the reader with the question, which ones? Which thoughts will he carry as luggage into the lifeboat, into his future life, his survival? And which ones will he leave behind? I hope he leaves the thoughts that are self-destructive behind. I hope he can leave those to his past and move into the future carrying the supportive, nurturing, self-caring thoughts with him as he tries to survive whatever metaphorical shipwreck he is escaping. The entire scene is a psychological drama within the narrator’s state of mind.

*Narrators with a Dreamlike Stream of Subconsciousness*

Although not common, several haiku writers have explored dreams and written haiku as a stream of the subconscious mind. Consider this haiku by Bob Boldman:

dreaming of scissors  
that cut my shadow into  
the shape of an elm

Bob Boldman, *Walking with the River*

The narrator of this haiku tells us that he is “dreaming of scissors” and then moves into a fantastic dreamlike action “that cut my shadow / into the shape of an elm.” The active subconscious mind is engaged in a creative act, shaping his shadow into the shape of a tree shadow. There is no separation of man and nature, but this comes from an act within a dream.

her ribs the music of the spheres

Bill Pauly, *Walking Uneven Ground*, 108

Although not clearly an expression of subconsciousness, the surprising combination of “her ribs” and “the music of the spheres” suggests some mystical or intuited connection. The narrator seems to be noticing her ribs, which I take to mean the movement of her breathing — rhythmic and continuous. They are curved and aligned under her skin. Then the narrator compares them or declares them to be “the music of the spheres.” This is a reference to the movement of planets in the heavens or Pythagoras’ explanation of transparent “spheres” carrying the sun and planets. Some things are beyond the narrator’s conscious understanding.

*Narrators in States of Contemplation or Prayer*

With historical connections to Zen Buddhism and Zazen meditation, haiku has a long history of narrators representing various states of contemplation or prayer.

in the temple

a

heartbeat

Bob Boldman, *Walking with the River*

In this minimalist poem, the narrator simply declares that his body is a temple. Perhaps this comes from sitting meditation, where the key realization is the awareness of one’s own heartbeat.

He is alive. There is a heartbeat. The heartbeat makes it a temple.  
The temple is there for people to realize the beatitude of their  
existence, a heartbeat.

evening prayer  
her fingers slowly examine  
the remaining breast

Jean Jorgensen, *Global Haiku*, 66

Jorgensen's narrator is engaged in "evening prayer" after a mastectomy. She is trying to understand this loss and what it means to her. She has slowed down and taken time to think, to pray, and to "slowly examine / the remaining breast." There is always concern that the cancer may have spread to the other breast, so in some ways this is simply a double-check. On the other hand, this is an act of self-care and healing. She is examining her current state of being as well as hopes for the future. We don't know her thoughts, but we can imagine possibilities, just as she does in this evening prayer time.

the apples left  
in a leafless tree: a prayer  
for your lymph nodes

Peter Yovu, *Haiku 21*, 178

When we read this haiku, we imagine a narrator who is concerned for a friend who has cancer. The narrator sees "the apples left / in a leafless tree" which represents fruit left behind after the harvest. The leaves are gone so the shriveled fruit is more easily seen. The narrator thinks of his friend who has been fighting cancer. Perhaps the friend has been through surgery or chemotherapy treatment, and now fears that the cancer will show up in their lymph nodes. The haiku narrator prays that cancer will not remain, unlike the apples in the leafless tree.

traffic jam  
my small son asks  
who made God

Peggy Lyles, *To Hear the Rain*, 57

The narrator of this haiku experiences a change of consciousness. In the opening she is in a “traffic jam” which means that she is stuck in traffic and probably worried that she may be late to wherever she is going. Her state of mind is focused on her to-do list and how slowly the traffic is moving. Then from the back seat comes “my small son asks / who made God.” Wow. What an interesting question for a little boy to ask. He is thinking about creation and “who made God.” A theological logjam not expected to come from a child. With this question, the narrator shifts into Mom mode. How does she reply to his question? Is she happy that he is thinking about such issues? What really matters most? Getting through this traffic jam or enjoying the time she has with her son, who won’t be small for long.

*Narrators on Social Issues and Trauma*

snow outside  
everyone else rises  
to receive the host

paul m. (Paul Miller), *Called Home*

Some haiku narrators show us what it’s like to be under pressure to do what “everyone else” does. In this haiku, the narrator starts by noticing the “snow outside,” which suggests that his mind is already more “outside” than in the sanctuary. It could be that everyone is about to receive communion, or it could a social gathering where the host arrives late. Either way, the narrator feels out of sync when “everyone else rises / to receive the host.”

Consider the next two haiku that portray experiences and perspectives about abortion:

abortion clinic  
backing away from their shouts  
she stumbles

Rod Willmot, *Global Haiku*, 106

after the abortion  
    she weeds  
the garden

George Swede, *Almost Unseen*, 54

In the first haiku, Willmot's narrator is a witness reporting this event — “she stumbles” as she backs away from the abortion clinic protestors. She was probably headed to the abortion clinic. By noticing that she is “backing away” and that “she stumbles” suggests how difficult this is for her. The shouts are being heard. The narrator does not reveal their own thoughts or feelings on the issue.

In the second haiku, Swede's narrator is also very matter-of-fact, stating that “after the abortion / she weeds / the garden.” He lets the reader imagine seeing her in the garden, knowing that she recently had an abortion. Is this her way of finding peace, the garden being a place of contemplation? Does she feel good about growing things, nurturing the plants in her garden? Is weeding the garden like her recent abortion? Swede's narrator leaves us with lots of questions that suggest the possible swirling thoughts this woman may be feeling. In both cases, the haiku narrators ask us to think about the women and their inner states of being.



Trying to forget him  
stabbing  
the potatoes.

Alexis Rotella, *The Haiku Anthology*, 172

Rotella's narrator is very direct, conveying her thoughts about a breakup. She is, of course, not stabbing the former boyfriend, but she directs her anger into "stabbing the potatoes." She is "Trying to forget him," but evidently will have to work out some anger before she succeeds.

the sack of kittens  
sinking into the icy creek,  
increases the cold

Nicholas Virgilio, *The Haiku Anthology*, 259

Although it is not clear whether the narrator is merely a witness or a participant in the killing of the kittens, this haiku makes us uncomfortable watching the act. While we have laws against animal cruelty, we also know that people do abandon pets and "get rid" of kittens as depicted in this haiku. The haiku is written in the present tense so that we join the narrator in watching "the sack of kittens / sinking into the icy creek." The last line of the haiku "increases the cold" provides some stream-of-consciousness insight that this is wrong.

I will close this section with one more haiku about feeling the coldness of death:

JANUARY FIRST  
the fingers of the prostitute cold

Bob Boldman, *The Haiku Anthology*, 15

For this haiku, I imagine that the narrator is either a friend or detective who is investigating the death of a prostitute. The date on the calendar is in bold letters: “JANUARY FIRST” which suggests that this death occurred near or just after New Year’s eve. Perhaps the prostitute had no one to celebrate the coming of another year — no friends or loved ones to share her life. Did she have any hopes for the future? All we know is that the narrator found “the fingers of the prostitute cold” which implies that she is dead. The narrator doesn’t share their state of mind, but as I imagine them (detective or friend), I can’t help but think what a waste of a human being’s life.

(5) Who is speaking?

Throughout our lives we play different roles in society. These roles are sometimes characterized by a change of hats, clothes, costumes, or uniforms that symbolize as our identities. Haiku narrators often provide clues about the social role or identity of the speaker. Here is a haiku about how we change roles, sometimes within a single day:

Undressed:  
today’s role dangles  
from a metal hanger

Alexis Rotella, *Global Haiku*, 87

The narrator in this haiku recognizes that she has options from day to day. In this next haiku, we see how someone changes roles over a lifetime:

dress by dress  
the story of her life  
day lilies close

Peggy Lyles, *To Hear the Rain*, 83

I imagine the scene of this haiku as a gathering of siblings going through a recently departed mother's things. The grown children are going through the closet and remembering various dresses saved as keepsakes of special occasions. The "day lilies close" shows that this beautiful lifetime has come to an end and will not blossom again tomorrow.

As we consider who is speaking in a haiku, we will examine haiku about (1) family roles, (2) social relationship roles, (3) professional roles, (4) social group membership roles, and (5) literary avatars. We will conclude with examples of the implied roles of the objective ego-less observer and the subjective autobiographical haiku narrators.

#### *Narrators in Family Roles*

warm milk before dawn:  
my milk flows into her  
unseen

Ruth Yarrow, *No One Sees the Stems*

Although she is known as a naturalist educator and expert on birds, in this haiku, Yarrow's narrator comes from the role of a mother. This young mother puts us right in the middle of breast feeding. We start with the "warm milk before dawn" followed by the narrator's voice that "my milk flows into her / unseen." The last line provides an extra special recognition of the mystery of how life flows from one person to the next.

Weight lifter  
slowly lifting  
the tea cup

Garry Gay, *The Haiku Anthology*, 48

I imagine the narrator of this haiku as a mother or friend of the family. They are watching this strong athlete “slowly lift / the tea cup” with a little girl. Although the wording first suggests that he or she is lifting some heavy weights, we are surprised to see that it is actually a tea cup. We realize that this is a haiku about someone taking time for a tea party with a little girl.

custody battle  
a bodyguard lifts the child  
to see the snow

Dee Evetts, *The Haiku Anthology*, 44

The narrator of Evetts' haiku is perhaps present in a courtroom where a custody battle is underway. The parents and lawyers are focused on the proceedings. Meanwhile, this narrator notices that the person who is actually caring for the child is a bodyguard who “lifts the child / to see the snow.”

summer night  
newly-weds cutting shelfpaper  
—their bright light

Carol Montgomery, *The Haiku Anthology*, 123

This haiku features a newly-wed couple moving into their new home. The narrator is presumably someone helping them move in. It is a summer night and they are “cutting shelfpaper” to get the kitchen cabinets ready. It may be getting late but they are energized and beaming with excitement. The narrator enjoys being part of “their bright light.”

*Narrators in Social Relationships*

van life  
every day a different  
adventure  
parking lot

Aaron Barry, *Eggplants & Teardrops*, 83

This haiku portrays a homeless family or person. The narrator is sarcastically writing (and editing) their story of “van life.” At first, the narrator chooses an exciting stance with “adventure,” but then strikes that out and replaces it with a more realistic description “parking lot.”

in the single’s bar  
magnifying loneliness:  
her thick eye glasses

Nicholas Virgilio, *Global Haiku*, 100

This haiku features the alienation and isolation of people in society. The narrator and subject of this haiku are “in the single’s bar” but fail to connect. The narrator notices the loneliness in her magnified eyes and this only intensifies the distance between them.

spring breeze —  
the pull of her hand  
as we near the pet store

Michael Dylan Welch, *Global Haiku*, 103

The narrator in this haiku uses the plural first-person voice: “we near the pet store.” In this case, the pair is enjoying the spring breeze when suddenly she wants to look at the new puppies or

kittens in the pet store. We can feel “the pull of her hand” and their springtime fun.

I will close our discussion of social interactions with this one by Wally Swist:

sharing my good news  
     his handshake  
 slackens

Wally Swist, *The Silence Between Us*, 85

In this haiku, the narrator is proud of a recent accomplishment. However, as he shares “my good news” with a friend or professional acquaintance, their response is significantly less than celebratory. Perhaps they did not get a raise or promotion or their life is not working out so well. The narrator’s “good news” just reminds them of their own less satisfying situation.

*Narrators in Professional or Work Roles*

There are many haiku that celebrate professional or worker perspectives. Sometimes these are written in the third person as if the narrator is admiring the worker’s state of mind.

spring breeze  
 the barber knocks his pushbroom  
 against the curb

Chuck Brickley, *Earthshine*, 18

In this haiku, the narrator hears the pushbroom being tapped against the curb. The spring breeze is refreshing as the barber is sprucing up the sidewalk outside his shop. The narrator admires the way the barber takes pride in his work, including the entrance.

thunder  
my woodshavings roll  
along the veranda

Dee Evetts, *Haiku in English*, 122

Evetts uses the first-person narrator for this carpenter's haiku. He starts with the simple one-word first line, "thunder" which implies that outdoors carpentry work may be over soon. Then we feel the breeze as he says, "my woodshavings roll / along the veranda." I can easily imagine the smell of those shavings that lightly roll and blow off the porch.

8 seconds . . .  
the bull rider opens  
a hand to the sky

Chad Lee Robinson, *Haiku in English*, 268

The narrator of this haiku is at a rodeo. He is watching the bull riders and admiring their competitive spirit. Each bull rider has to reach the 8-seconds mark in order to be scored, with other points being awarded for style. The best bull riders make it look effortless. The narrator admires how "the bull rider opens / a hand to the sky" which takes our eyes from the dirt to the heavens.

*Narrators as Members of Social Groups*

deep snow  
in the tribal house  
the warmth of old stones

Donna Beaver, *Rainforest Poems*

The narrator is a member of the tribe. They have walked through the deep snow to join others in the "tribal house" where she feels "the warmth of old stones."

Quaker meeting  
breaking the silence  
rain at the window

Caroline Gourlay, *Global Haiku*, 52

The narrator of this haiku is attending a Quaker meeting where worshippers gather in silence. They are attending to the spirit when “rain at the window” breaks the silence.

poetry group  
deep in thought:  
gurgle of plumbing

Martin Lucas, *Global Haiku*, 71

At this poetry gathering, there is a pause while people are deep in thought. Perhaps they are considering edits or possible revisions to a haiku? During this silence, the narrator hears the “gurgle of plumbing” which contrasts their creative silence.

where he went  
to kindergarten  
first AA meeting

John Stevenson, *My Red*, 62

This haiku is written in the third person omniscient voice. The narrator tells us that this is his “first AA meeting” and that it is, ironically, where he first started school. Kindergarten and a first AA meeting both represent new beginnings.

back from the war  
all his doors  
swollen shut

Bill Pauly, *Walking Uneven Ground*, 104



This haiku is about someone who is “back from war” — perhaps the Vietnam war. Also written in the third person omniscient voice, the narrator tells us “all his doors / swollen shut” suggesting that although he has returned, he is not ready to join society. He needs more time to heal in order to truly return and be able to open doors both to visitors and the world.

*Narrators as Declared Literary Avatars*

Although not as common as other approaches to haiku narrators, some writers have created deliberate literary avatars as characters who tell the stories of their haiku. These literary avatars usually are named by the writers so readers understand that they are writing these haiku from this imagined persona.

Snow	the	looms
on	white	in
the	head	the
mountain	of	mirror
	Tao-Li	

Evelyn Tooley Hunt, *The Haiku of Tao-Li*, 9

Tao-Li was one of the earliest known haiku persona used to write haiku in English. Created by Evelyn Tooley Hunt, this literary narrator is an imaginary Asian writer. Hunt published Tao-Li’s haiku in three vertical lines that often seemed to be an appropriation of imagined oriental themes such as scarecrows or cherry blossoms. Not all of her haiku refer to Tao-Li directly as we see in this example.

Sobi-Shi cools  
the stolen melon  
in the baptismal font

Raymond Roseliep, *Collected Haiku*, 139

Roseliep also enjoyed writing haiku using his Japanese narrator, Sobi-Shi. Unlike Evelyn Tooley Hunt, he embraced this alter-ego as a fellow “lover of the rose” and wrote haiku about romance and other human relationships. Sometimes he referred to Sobi Shi as a key character in these haiku, but often Sobi-Shi was noted as the author of a series of haiku instead of being the featured subject of the haiku. In this haiku, the narrator depicts Sobi-Shi as a rascal who has stolen a melon and is cooling it “in the baptismal font.”

noddy’s narrow digs—  
     on a thin twig of plum  
         a wren sings his joy

Robert Spiess, *Noddy*, 62

Robert Spiess published his next-to-last collection, *Noddy*, through Modern Haiku Press in 1997. As he says in the preface, “The ‘noddy’ who appears in many of the poems seems to some to be an eccentric, even a sort of booby; while others wonder if he is not fulfilling his life by according with the two sides of his nature: that of the student of both the manifest and the transcendent, and the humorist.” Like Bashō referring to his hut or Issa referring to his shack, Spiess’ narrator refers to “noddy’s narrow digs” in this haiku. Noddy enjoys the simple life and celebrates the riches of finding that “on a thin twig of plum / a wren sings his joy.”

you feel them even  
 if Ed Sullivan won’t let you —  
 swivel of hips

Carlos Colón, *Haiku Elvis*, 7

Carlos Colón enjoyed dressing up like Elvis and reading his Elvis-inspired haiku. As you can see from this example, he “channels” the voice of Elvis Presley as the narrator. Several of his Elvis haiku are based on biographical knowledge about Elvis or allusions to his songs and movies.

in the dead cat's eyes  
    harvest  
    moons

by Bucktooth (David G. Lanoue, *Haiku Guy*, 6)

This haiku is the first haiku shared by Bucktooth, the protagonist in David Lanoue's haiku novel, *Haiku Guy*. Bucktooth shares this poem with haiku master "Cup-of-Tea" (Issa), who approves of it and accepts Bucktooth as his student. Lanoue enjoys writing haiku fiction, which, of course, features a literary narrator who is learning how to write haiku from masters from old Japan as well as from a group of haiku writers in New Orleans.

*Narrators as Objective Ego-less Observers*

Some approaches to writing haiku or senryū downplay or ignore the role of narrators. Objective haiku poetics call for the writer to be an ego-less "everyman" who perceives nature or reality without subjective response or cultural bias. In the objective approach, the implied haiku narrator is either a nature lover or an unemotional observer of the world. Readers of objective haiku are, likewise, expected to be observers of nature and reality.

A bitter morning:  
    sparrows sitting together  
    without any necks.

James W. Hackett, *The Haiku Anthology*, 61

Hackett is known for promoting an ego-less approach to writing haiku as a Zen-like way of life. He argues that the writer should not be present in the haiku. The focus should be on the images and things written about. The significance is in the objective observation and implied comparisons available in the juxtaposition of images. I call the narrators of this approach an "everyman" because what matters is not who wrote or speaks the haiku, but

that it is presented without social bias. Let's read this haiku as narrated by an objective observer of nature. He notes that it is "A bitter morning," then observes that there are some "sparrows sitting together / without any necks." He provides no clues to the reader about who is speaking. There is no indication of who the narrator is or why they are speaking. He simply shares observations. The reader can make their own conclusions and subjective responses without the narrator's help.

from mud  
     to sky  
         the heron's feet

Paul O. Williams, *Midwest Haiku Anthology*, 106

In this haiku, we have another example of an objective observation of nature. The narrator is standing near a body of water and watches a heron take off into the sky. He notes how the heron moves "from mud / to sky" and how the feet carry some of the mud into the sky as it goes. We can easily imagine this observation and see the heron lift off out of the mud and tuck its muddy feet together behind itself as it stretches out its wings in flight. I like the way this haiku is written to suggest that heaven and earth are connected in this flight, but that is not a subjective point the narrator makes.

closed mental hospital  
 swings creaking  
 among windblown weeds

Wally Swist, *The Silence Between Us*, 107

Here is another haiku voiced by an objective narrator. In this case, the narrator has gone to a "closed mental hospital" where he hears "swings creaking / among windblown weeds." This objective presentation lets the reader imagine being there but does not provide clues as to what the visitor feels or thinks. As readers, we can notice things not mentioned — such as the

children who are no longer on the swings. The overall image of “windblown weeds” suggests a place that is no longer cared for by gardeners or grounds crew. The scene suggests a haunted, abandoned place that no longer houses suffering patients with hopes and dreams of recovery. We get just the objective facts. The subjective interpretation is left to the reader.

### *Narrators as Subjective Autobiography*

Subjective haiku poetics call for the writer to be autobiographical, to write about their own experiences and feelings from their individualistic view of the world. In the subjective approach, the implied narrator is the writer themselves, as if everything is simply an expression of personal experiences or inner feelings. Readers of subjective haiku imagine what it must be like to see things from the author’s perspective. Subjective haiku are usually written in first-person voice or implied first-person consciousness. Biographical knowledge of the poet’s life can help inform a reader’s understanding of autobiographical narrators.

empty mailbox  
i pick wildflowers  
on my way back

Marlene Mountain, *The Haiku Anthology*, 130

Marlene divorced her husband, John Wills, and changed her name to Marlene Mountain. She lived on a mountain farm in Tennessee where she gardened and created art. She was a very independent woman who championed women’s rights, was an anti-war protester, and an advocate for ecological issues. When I read this haiku, I admire her autobiographical voice. She has walked out to the mailbox, found it empty and on the way back picks wildflowers. It was a worthwhile walk.

Writing at my desk,  
I look out across the sea —  
words slip their moorings

Caroline Gourlay, *Global Haiku*, 53

A resident of Wales, Caroline Gourlay appears to be autobiographical in this haiku. We can take it at face value that she is writing at her desk, looking out across the sea. Her imagination goes further than her actual vision, however, and she views her haiku, her writing, as ships at sea. Her “words slip their moorings,” and venture out from her desk across the sea.

Winter evening —  
    grandma’s recipe for bread  
        among my poems

Vincent Tripi, *Global Haiku*, 89

In this haiku, the narrator appears to be Tripi himself. It is a winter evening, and he finds “grandma’s recipe for bread / among my poems.” His grandma was a baker of bread, and he warms up with poetry.

sunrise  
I forget my side  
of the argument

George Swede, *Almost Unseen*, 44

George Swede is known for his observations of human behavior, but in this haiku, he appears to be focused on himself, or at least his narrator admits that come morning, “I forget my side / of the argument.” It is a new day, a fresh sunrise. He no longer needs to win the argument. There are better things to do.

walking down  
the country lane  
childless as the moon

Bill Pauly, *Walking Uneven Ground*, 100

Written as a stream-of-consciousness conversation with himself, this haiku seems very autobiographical. Bill Pauly loved children but never was blessed to raise a child of his own. If you know his biography, then you know that he experienced the devastating loss of a child at its birth. I have no trouble reading this haiku as a sad walk “down / the country lane” still “childless as the moon.”

#### 6 – Haiku Narrators Prompt Appropriate Reader Responses

Reader response depends on a prompted collaborative role for the readers. Without an obvious narrator in a haiku, the reader is left only with words to imagine who is talking, how they are talking, why they are talking, and what is an appropriate response to their voice. The reader may choose to connect with the imagined narrator. Once the haiku has been imagined and taken to heart, it turns out that the reader and narrator are both fictions. The only thing that is real is the more universal social nature of being human, the shared collective consciousness of being alive, through the collaborative act of haiku imagination.

Although this section is not the primary focus of this essay, I want to revisit the ways readers may respond to the imaginary haiku narrator. Sometimes this response to the haiku is just a quiet pause of imagination, an exploration of associations or related memories, or an enjoyment of the subsequent emotion that arises. Sometimes the reader chooses to “talk back” or to “talk with” the imagined narrator of each haiku. Readers don’t have to agree with the narrator’s perspective or attitudes. They don’t have to share the haiku narrator’s cultural values. Readers can resist or accept that voice as authentic, true, or contrived. They can push

back and declare that the haiku narrator is just a trickster, or they can accept that voice and enjoy participating in an imagined experience. Some haiku are intended to make us uncomfortable. Others provide a sense of comfortable consonance and acceptance. Consider the shifting haiku narrator in the following haiku:

dogwood blossoms  
 he chambers a round  
 at the classroom door

Hannah Mahoney, *Modern Haiku* 54.1, 2023, 61

At first, we imagine being outdoors enjoying the springtime dogwood blossoms. The blossoms are fragrant and beautiful. It's a wonderful spring day in the neighborhood. But wait. What is happening here? Suddenly our haiku narrator is witnessing a gunman who "chambers a round / at the classroom door," so we have shifted to a school setting. In fact, we are witnessing a possible school shooter. We are not far from that door. This is immediate. Personal. Our haiku narrator positions us to be witnesses to this horror on what should be an enjoyable spring day. The normal joys of an ordinary day at school become the scene of another heart-wrenching shooting of innocent children. I don't want to be there and certainly don't enjoy imagining what it must be like to experience such horrors. But this is the world we live in. The shooter is not the narrator. As a reader, I refuse to put myself in the shooter's shoes, choosing to relate to this narrator's perspective as a fellow teacher or parent outraged by the continual tragedies occurring in a society loaded with mass killers.

### Conclusion – How Narrative Theory Contributes to the Art of Reading and Writing Haiku

Narrators are not usually the centerpiece of most haiku, but they are an important part of the art of reading haiku. Haiku follows a tradition of being written in the present-tense, with actions and



perceptions being depicted in the narrator's current time. Haiku is a poetry of being present and inviting the reader to imagine being present to the situation being shared. It is a moment of something happening right now. I always encourage my students to read a haiku out loud before imagining or discussing it with others. This helps readers hear the voice of the haiku and understand the spirit of its language. Then we can consider the scene and details of the haiku itself — how the images provide us with a point of view or perception of the things being talked about. We can relate to the imagined storyteller and choose to relate or connect the narrator with our own experiences. Or we can imagine a perspective we've never considered or experienced before.

If the haiku is written in first person, employing the pronouns such as "I" or "my" or "we" or "us," then the narrator is clearly inviting the reader to see things as if they were in the narrator's shoes. Sometimes the first-person pronouns are not used, but there is an implied first-hand consciousness that functions in the same way. Such haiku are monologues inviting the reader to imagine being in the speaker's situation:

spring evening  
I play with the last kitten  
to be given away

Chuck Brickley, *Earthshine*, 24

summer night  
we turn out all the lights  
to hear the rain

Peggy Lyles, *To Hear the Rain*, 45

If the haiku is written in second person, then the narrator is a character in a story talking to a "you" or "your" as a voice of

direct inclusion. In this case, the narrator is prompting the reader to take the role of the other character, the “you” who is being addressed. The reader is addressed as someone experiencing the events or situation being discussed. This is not common in haiku, but when it does occur, the reader takes the role of someone participating, at least imaginatively, in a dialogue. The reader imaginatively becomes one of the partners in the dialogue:

the firefly you caught  
lights the church you make  
with your hands

Raymond Roseliep, *Collected Haiku*, 120

You bring me tea  
as if everything  
were perfect

Alexis Rotella, *Global Haiku*, 85

If the haiku is written in third person with pronouns such as “he” or “his” or “she” or “her” or “they” or “them,” then the narrator is telling a story about someone else. The narrator is a witness or observer of the characters and their interactions or behavior. The haiku narrator is not an active participant in the situation being discussed, although their language choices may indicate certain attitudes or emotional responses to the events being portrayed. If the narrator just reports the facts and events without commentary, this is considered to be third person objective narration. If the narrator shares the thoughts and feelings of the characters or shares personal judgements about them, this is considered to be third person subjective narration. If the narrator knows and shares the characters thoughts and feelings, this is considered to be omniscient point-of-view narration.

school's out —  
a boy follows his dog  
into the woods

Randy Brooks, *School's Out*, 17

In this haiku, the objective narrator only reports what they see, but does not provide subjective commentary or interpretation. Other approaches embrace the writer's immediate responses or implied subjective state of being, even in haiku that appear to be simply reporting events as images of perception.

The omniscient narrator is rarely employed in haiku, though some haiku do seem to share the brief subjective response that would only be known by characters in the haiku. Sometimes these inner feelings are presented as quoted speech or thoughts of the character in a haiku as in this haiku:

boiling beet tops  
only for the scent  
Papa loved

Raymond Roseliep, *Collected Haiku*, 67

Haiku writers and critics have a lot to gain by becoming more aware of the importance of narrative theory and how it applies to this art. We intuitively imagine the significance of narrators in each haiku. As both readers and writers, we have a lot to gain by playing with the possibilities of the haiku narrator.

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