

Short Word Prejudice

Gary Hotham

"Haiku are great if you only know a bunch of short words."*

This statement about the haiku form came in an email. For a poet, it's always good to have friends around to provide their skeptical thoughts about your chosen forms of expression. So once again life's metaphysical pause: why this and not that? The statement was preceded by a paragraph expressing my friend's concern that "haiku poems never use words that would send people to the dictionary." And in his opinion our great American poet, Poe, caught up in the haiku spirit, would never have used *tintinnabulation* in "The Bells" but something like "to the sound that little silver bells make so musically wells from the bells, bells, bells, bells . . . from the tinkling and the jingling of the bells." His statement about the lack of words in a haiku that would send a reader to the dictionary and his example of Poe's word would make one think it is probably not short words that are his concern but words that are too ordinary, too common, too simple. Perhaps there is in the statement the idea that poetry needs difficult and elegant words to elevate it to a higher level of cultural refinement.

It has never entered my mind that one of my goals, as a writer of haiku, is to send my readers to the dictionary. I don't mind if they do go. I suspect most writers think their audience is fairly literate in our language. We don't sit around wondering if our readers understand the words in our poem. It certainly is not the length of the words, however defined, that is our prime concern but whether the words in the grammatical structure of our poetry create the best poem. Sometimes the simple reversal of two words or flipping the lines of our poem can sharpen and deepen the haiku's meaning for the reader way beyond any change of one word for another or a longer word for a shorter one. We are not adverse to changing the words. I do not know of any carefully devised scientific surveys to support this, but I doubt if many poets think they need to prove to the world that they know more than a bunch of short, common, everyday words and so give much thoughtful energy to proving it by changing a short one for a longer one, the common for the strange, the simple for the complex.

My desire as a poet is to let the reader experience the moment, the state of being that is the focus of the haiku, with as much intensity as is possible. I want words that not only recreate the moment but resonate with the reader, that make the experience reverberate, and—especially since it is a haiku—with only those few words that are necessary. A poet works his words hard. I think the haiku form especially favors short words, common words that build but don't distract from the goal. It is possible that a word that might send a reader to the dictionary is the best one to use or that an unusual and uncommon one like *tintinnabulation* is most appropriate. On the whole, I don't want a distraction from the flow. In the poet's bag of skills and tricks knowing well a bunch of short words that do not send people to a dictionary is a distinct advantage. One must be careful: a reader who goes willingly to the dictionary might never come back to the poem.

Some people in our audience who would like a dollop or two of verbosity in their poems may think haiku writers do not like words since they use so few. I don't think that is the case. The poet recognizes the strength of words and wants to highlight that power with as few as necessary. Yes, just enough to intensify the language of the poem for the reader. One thing the poet is doing with a poem is creating a focus on the power of the word. A poet certainly does not believe that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never harm me." I suspect most poets are likely to have a greater fear of the lasting damage poorly chosen words can inflict on the reader. Of all people, we poets, even when we fail, should be committed to words that tell the truth. We seek poetry that clarifies rather than hides the essence of our existence.

I think poets ought to be proud, pleased, and happy that they can make powerful haiku out of a few short words. If the universe itself is made out of many very small things, then why not take on the challenge of great poems created with "a bunch of short words"?

* Lance Maloney, who is, among many other things, a globalizing thinker, rambunctious storyteller, and name-brand coffee addict, in a personal message to the author, December 3, 2007.