

## TOOLBOX: SIMILES REAL AND IMPLIED

*Paul Miller*

Similes have traditionally been discouraged in English-language haiku, and rightly so. This isn't to say that Japanese masters didn't use them. Bashō, for example, wrote several haiku that included a simile, however, they are arguably some of the weaker poems in his canon. Here are two:

The voices of reeds, Sound like the mimicry of The autumn winds! <sup>1</sup>	A matsutake mushroom! With its skin scarred, it looks like A real pine tree! <sup>2</sup>
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Various authors have given their reasons for steering clear of this particular poetic device. Peggy Lyles wrote:

Why, then, are newcomers to haiku writing urged to avoid simile, metaphor, personification and other traditional tropes? There are many good answers, I think, but the most important is that haiku poets ... place high value on the creatures and things of this world just as they are, each unique in its essential nature and worthy of unobscured attention. Comparing one thing to another often seems to diminish both.<sup>3</sup>

Our Robert Spiess echoed those sentiments in one of his *Speculations*: “Perhaps for us the main reason that good haiku seldom use simile is exemplified by the proverb ‘Comparisons are odious.’”<sup>4</sup> And as Bruce Ross notes:

Traditional Japanese haiku occasionally contains figurative language, such as exaggeration, simile, and metaphor, exactly as used in lyric poetry elsewhere. But such devices tend to overburden such a small poem at the expense of the haiku values of spareness, resonance, and mystery.<sup>5</sup>

However, I think the real problem with the use of simile in haiku is that it is a complete thought, and doesn't allow for any space (or *ma*) between

any parts of the poem, thus not allowing the reader any active engagement with the poem. The reader is simply a passive observer, and all they can do is agree or disagree with the (essentially) poetic statement. In this case the poem acts more as a showcase for the poet's cleverness. This is contrary to haiku's origins as a communal poetry, in which poets (participating in linked verse) exchanged verses back and forth between themselves—in conversation, not lecture.

Of late I have been seeing a kind of haiku that acts like a simile, even though it doesn't use the distinguishing "as" or "like." An example might be:

Alzheimer's  
the locked doors  
of the retirement home

The pairing here is an interesting one, even if it isn't necessarily a successful haiku. The reason for my qualification is that it isn't a pairing of two complete parts, because the first line isn't fully fleshed out. As it stands, the first line is void of context, which makes the reader consider "Alzheimer's" in its entirety—as an abstraction. The result of the weak first line is that it then forces the reader to move to the next line in search of the missing context, but since there isn't a logical connection between the following lines, the reader creates one, and tends to read the relationship as if there was an equal sign between the parts, or as an overt simile, i.e.

Alzheimer's is like the locked doors of the retirement home

In this way it isn't so much a haiku as it is a statement; and it is a statement because of the undeveloped first line. Consider the difference between the following two haiku, the first a rewrite by myself of Janice Bostok's poem.

pregnancy ...  
the fluttering of moths  
against the window

pregnant again ...  
the fluttering of moths  
against the window

*Janice Bostok*

In Bostok’s poem, the simple addition of “again” adds a human person, which considerably widens the scope and possible meanings of the poem. More importantly, it provides context. The first, similar to the Alzheimer’s haiku, reads like a simile.

Revisiting the Alzheimer’s poem, there are various strategies we could take to flesh out the first line. Here are two possibilities:

his Alzheimer’s bracelet	Alzheimer’s ward
the locked doors	the locked doors
of the retirement home	of the retirement home

In the first solution, we add a real person, one that we can picture. This creates a relatable image. I may not know of someone who has Alzheimer’s, but I can relate to you if you tell me that you know someone who does. And the minute you say “his” or “hers” in a poem I can conjure up a person, clothes and all. Likewise, in the second, a ward brings in machines, nurses, and other tangible images (with their scents and sounds). Importantly, in both cases, the additional words add context, so the first line ceases to be an abstraction.

Perhaps another way to think of the importance of context is to reflect upon how haiku link internally (similar to the linking in a renku verse). When a reader links or leaps from one part of the poem to the next, they need to be grounded in the first part before they can move to the next. Similar to using stepping stones to cross a river; you need a solid base upon which to step from. An abstraction isn’t a solid base; context makes it solid.

An open question might be why poets are writing such contextless lines. One reason may be the repeated saw that haiku are the shortest of poems, which might be taken as a commandment to minimalize them. Indeed, if you look at some haiku from the 1980s, they were often terse. But I also wonder if the reason is not due to skipping a final step in a haiku’s preparation: that of noting how a reader could read or misread a poem. It is worth remembering haiku’s communal origins.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Oseko, Toshiharu. *Basho's Haiku*, Vol. 2. Japan: Maruzen Co., Ltd. 1996, 14.  
Ibid, 322.

<sup>2</sup> Lyles, Peggy Willis. "Regarding Poetry: The Shape of the Song" in *World Haiku Review*. November 2001. <https://whrarchives.wordpress.com/2011/12/10/regarding-poetry-the-shape-of-the-song/>. Accessed February 16, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> in *Modern Haiku* 32.2 (2001). "Speculation" 813 (MH 32.2)

<sup>4</sup> Ross, Bruce. "The Essence of Haiku" in *Modern Haiku* 38.3 (2007).

<sup>5</sup> in *Haiku Magazine* 6:1-2 (1974).