
ESSAYS

Euphony in Haiku

Brad Bennett

“The sound must seem an echo to the sense.”

*Alexander Pope*¹

The sensory haiku moment, whether experienced or created in the poem itself, is crucial to a successful haiku. It’s always been the main focus for me. But the haiku is, of course, a poem, and poems are designed to be read aloud. When we listen to a poem, we are attracted to its pleasing sounds and how they create unity in the poem. A successful haiku resonates. It coheres. So, as haiku poets, we need to think about how our poems sound, in addition to whether we’ve captured the haiku moment. If we are able to construct an authentic haiku moment, and also choose words made of sounds that enhance the music, create more unity, and add to the meaning or emotional resonance of the poem, then we are getting the most out of our poems.

I was inspired to dive more deeply into this examination of euphony by two experts in the use of this technique. First, I reread a seminal essay by Pamela Miller Ness, “The Poet’s Toolbox: Prosody in Haiku,” first published in *Modern Haiku* 37.2. Ness explains how sound often enhances a haiku’s meaning and impacts its emotional resonance: “When used with precision and subtlety, the elements of prosody such as meter, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, enjambment, and repetition can add to the musical enjoyment of the haiku while simultaneously extending the meaning and expanding the emotional resonance.”²

Second, I reread Peggy Willis Lyles’ influential book of haiku, *To Hear the Rain*. Lyles was a maestra at euphony. As Alan Burns writes in his introductory notes on Lyles in his anthology *Where the River Goes*: “Few haiku poets have attended so skillfully to sound as Lyles did in her

finely crafted poetry.”³ As Lyles herself writes in the preface of *To Hear the Rain*: “Sound enhances meaning. Every nuance contributes to the total effect.”⁴ Here is one of Lyles’ monoku that exhibits her mastery of euphonic techniques.

the turning tide at standstill sandhill cranes⁵

I’m first drawn to the repetition and alliteration of the **t**- and **s**- sounds in this haiku. In addition, pronouncing the near rhymes of “standstill” and then “sandhill,” with the cut in between, makes me pause, perhaps like the moment just before a wave crawls back down the beach. Two more from Lyles:⁶

sun shower
the river otter
somersaults

cedar shavings
the carpenter’s magnet
snaps up tacks

In the first haiku, we notice an alliteration of **s**- sounds on the first and third lines. We also hear **r-controlled** syllables ending three of the words, one in each line. In addition, all of the **s**’s and **r**’s in the poem mimic an otter undulating across the river. In the second haiku, the soft **c**- and **sh**-sounds on the first line help make that line sound soft and curly. Then the closed one-syllable words containing assonance in the last line make that line sound hard and sharp, thereby producing an effective contrast.

If we agree that these three poems “sound great,” that then leads us to our first question: How do we define euphony? The definition of euphony that I prefer, believe it or not, is from *Google Dictionary*: “the quality of being pleasing to the ear, especially through a harmonious combination of words; the tendency to make phonetic change for ease of pronunciation.”⁷ I like this definition because of its second part, because it implies an active effort by the poet to create sound harmony. It suggests we can and, perhaps, should create euphony in a deliberate and mindful way.

What, then, does euphony in haiku sound like? You know those moments when you read a haiku and immediately feel that it “sounds right” but can’t quite put your finger on why, until you study it a bit? I think we

sometimes respond positively to a haiku on an unconscious level when its word sounds are eliciting euphony. The poem sounds good in a musical way and hence feels unified. As Ness stated in her essay, euphony helps create music, extend the meaning, and expand the emotional resonance. It also helps to unify the poem.

Poetic euphony can be created in a variety of ways. Poets have traditionally written euphony into their poems by using phonemic poetic devices like rhyme, alliteration, consonance, assonance, and onomatopoeia. They also play with meter, rhythm, enjambment, repetition, and other techniques. For the purposes of this essay, I am going to focus on the phonemic devices, the ones that utilize individual sounds that make up words, and not with meter and rhythm. These sounds are referred to as phonemes, the smallest units of speech that distinguish one word from another. There are forty-four of them in the English language. The phonemes are produced by consonant sounds, vowel sounds, and combinations of consonants and vowels.

Let's take a closer look at how we can use some traditional phonemic poetic devices successfully. Historically, haikuists have eschewed rhyme, alliteration, consonance, assonance, and onomatopoeia for some very good reasons. Using them overtly can feel heavy-handed, too clever, too contrived, too cute, or too poetic—they can distract from the haiku moment or from the poem itself. But if we use them carefully and deftly, we can create some mighty fine music. As Bashō wrote about the process of thinking about euphony during revision, "...a thousand times on your lips."⁸

Lee Gurga, in *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*, writes: "...the judicious use of aural devices in haiku can help focus the reader/listener's attention on the important aspects of the verse. Overdoing, of course, can spoil a haiku. The brief, fragile haiku is easily overwhelmed by use of powerful sounds and sound associations. The approach of the haiku poet to this problem, as to everything, requires lightness and balance."⁹ If we act with lightness and balance, as Gurga suggests, these poetic devices can work successfully. As Ness asserts: "I suggest that we should actively utilize all of the musical devices available in our poet's toolboxes, though perhaps with a lighter touch given the brevity and fragility of haiku."¹⁰

First let's consider rhyme. Many of the early translations of Japanese haiku into English rhymed. In part, that is because many Japanese words rhyme. Jane Reichhold, in *Writing and Enjoying Haiku*, states: "...in Japanese, due to the constructive use of vowels in the language, one has a one-in-six chance that any two lines will rhyme. Thus, the Japanese haiku often have not only a line-end rhyme but often one or more internal rhymes. The writers used this ability to strengthen their poems."¹¹ In English, because it is rarer to rhyme in everyday language, rhymes stick out when used in haiku, especially end rhymes. Reichhold claims that end rhymes close the haiku down, and most haiku want to leave on an open note.¹² But rhyming can work, especially internal and near rhymes, if they are done subtly. As Jim Kacian explains in his article, "The Use of Language in Haiku," "Internal and off-rhyme is a bit easier to accommodate [as opposed to end rhyme], it being less powerful and final, and a good rule of thumb is to allow rhyme or off-rhyme to stand in a poem if it comes to the poem unbidden, and does not overpower the other elements in the poem."¹³ Let's look at rhyming that is successful at not overpowering the haiku. We'll examine haiku with end rhyme, internal rhyme, and near rhyme.

End rhymes are true rhymes at the ends of lines. As noted, end rhyme is usually too heavy-handed for haiku. But there are times when it might reinforce the content. With a light touch, it can work. Sometimes end rhyme can work if one word in the pair ends with an -s and the other doesn't. This can occur with nouns or verbs.

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

*Peggy Willis Lyles*¹⁴

In this haiku, night and lights are near rhymes. Making one of those end words plural tweaks the poem a bit so that the end rhyme doesn't sound sing-songy. Also, the end rhymes in the first two lines tie them together so that the third line stands out. End rhyme can also be used if the lines in which they occur have different meters, as in the following poem:

spring rain
the measured step
of a sandhill crane

*paul m.*¹⁵

This poem is not heavy-handed, even though it contains true rhymes on lines one and three, in part because the words before the rhyming words are accented differently. In line one, “spring rain” is equally accented. In line three, the word “sandhill” is a trochee, one accented syllable followed by an unaccented syllable. These different accents help to soften the rhymes.

Internal rhymes occur when there are two words that rhyme within a line, or within a haiku. According to Ness, an internal rhyme can help to unify ideas within a poem. Here’s an effective example.

morning stillness
what’s left of the mist
shines in the pines

*Ben Gaa*¹⁶

The internal rhyme in the last line helps make it resonate (and continue to shine). Internal rhymes also work well if one of the words is singular and one is plural, or one word is a verb ending with an *-s*.

lifting fog
every leaf tip drips
sunlight

*Barbara Snow*¹⁷

In this poem, the words “tip” and “drips” replicate the sound of the fog dripping. We can also use internal rhyme successfully on different lines, and in different positions in those lines.

through the chains
of a child’s swing
spring starts

*Judson Evans*¹⁸

The rhyme of “swing” at the end of line two and “spring” at the start of line three recreates the swinging action that is described in the poem. Sometimes a word can rhyme with part of another word to create euphony and unity.

sunlight
fills the millstone’s furrows
a pine warbler’s trill

*paul m.*¹⁹

In this poem, “fills” and “trill” rhyme with the “mill-” in “millstone.” In addition, the three rhymes mimic the repeated parts of a warbler’s song. Note that this poem successfully combines several of the rhyming techniques we’ve discussed: using internal rhymes with and without an -s, using rhymes on different lines, and using rhymes as parts of longer words.

Near rhyme occurs when words in a poem almost rhyme. This technique is also referred to as off, slant, imperfect, or approximate rhyme. As noted above, it is less intrusive and can be very effective. Ness asserts that you can create a sense of unity and closure in a poem without the heaviness and possible sing-song quality of pure end rhyme.²⁰

alone, not alone —
a loon
in still water

*Ben Moeller-Gaa*²¹

The repeated word “alone” in this haiku is very close to the words “a loon.” The three words create an echo effect like the sound of the loon’s call, adding to the emotional resonance of the poem.

winter forest
the mist
from a whisper

*Connie Donleycott*²²

The words “winter” and “whisper” are near rhymes. The word “mist” is pretty close too. They all help to create unity.

flowering laurel
the hedge trimmer lowering
the sky

*Michelle Schaefer*²³

The words “flowering,” “lowering,” and “laurel” all sound fairly close. They bind the poem together.

Alliteration is repetition at close intervals of initial consonant sounds. Kenneth Yasuda, in his book *The Japanese Haiku*, writes: “alliteration speaks gently where rhyme commands.”²⁴ But I would add that alliteration should also be used sparingly. David Grayson, in an essay called “Word Choice in English-Language Haiku: The Uses of Roots,”²⁵ writes that Anglo-Saxon words lend themselves to alliteration. In Laurence Perrine and Thomas R. Arp’s book *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, they claim: “In addition to onomatopoeic words there is another group of words, sometimes called **phonetic intensives**, whose sound, by a process as yet obscure, to some degree connects to their meaning.”²⁶ It’s intriguing to think that the sounds of the words have meaning, and not just the whole words. These intrinsic relationships of these phonemes work at the gut level. For example, initial **st**- sounds suggest strength, as in “sturdy,” “steel,” and, of course, “strong.” Initial **sl**- sounds infer things that are “smoothly wet” as in “slippery,” “slick,” and “slobber.” Here are examples that include these two phonetic intensives:

the same granite
in a stile’s step ...
village graveyard

*paul m.*²⁷

daylight moon
the slicked-down reeds
of a muskrat slide

*Cherrie Hunter Day*²⁸

Alliteration is commonly used to mimic real sounds. Here’s an example.

first frost
 the echo of the caw
 of the crow

*Mark Hollingsworth*²⁹

Here the repeated hard **c-** sounds mimic the call of the crow. And the word “crow” is a close echo of the sound of a caw. Alliteration can also emphasize quantity, since repeated instances of a particular sound allude to a greater number of a particular item in the poem, as in the number of leaves in a pile.

light
 on the pile
 last autumn leaf

*Jeannie Martin*³⁰

This poem is a pile of **l** sounds. Are you ready to dive in? Alliteration can work seamlessly if there are other words in between the words with alliterative sounds.

a change in their voices ...
 children finding
 a fledgling

*John Stevenson*³¹

The **ch-** sounds on lines one and two and the **f-** sounds on lines two and three connect to create unity. The alliteration is not in back-to-back words—there are words in between that prevent it from sounding like a tongue twister.

Kenneth Yasuda, in *The Japanese Haiku*, talks about what he calls “oblique alliteration,” which is the “repetition of the same initial consonant sound followed by a different consonant sound.”³² This can be created by using words that start with different consonant blends, like **sm-**, **sw-**, **st-**, **sp-**, etc. He claims that you can use oblique alliteration to produce “similarity” instead of “exactness.”

sleet storm
 the bare tree branches glisten
 with grackles

*Brenda J. Gannam*³³

In this poem, we find the **sl-** and **st-** in line one, and the **gl-** and **gr-** in lines two and three, examples of oblique alliteration that help to unify the poem. Yasuda also discusses what he calls “crossed alliteration.”³⁴ This is a more complex version of alliteration. This happens when sets of alliteration alternate, as in a chain.

a beer can
 for comparison
 bear paw print

*Carolyn Hall*³⁵

In Hall’s haiku, “beer” and “bear” alternate with “can” and “comparison.”

billowing clouds
 a spittle bug claims
 the daisy stem

*Julie Warther*³⁶

In this poem, there seem to be three links in the chain. “Billowing” and “bug,” “clouds” and “claims,” and “spittle” and “stem” all take turns alternating.

Consonance is similar to alliteration, but the repetition of consonant sounds is found in the medial or end positions of words. Gurga asserts that consonance is, “less dominating than alliteration.”³⁷ It’s certainly more subtle.

still wet
 the gravestones sparkle
 grackles

*Chuck Brickley*³⁸

This example includes medial consonance: the **k** sounds in the middle of “sparkle” and “grackle.”

last light
black ducks forage
for acorns

*Kristen Lindquist*³⁹

Lindquist’s poem includes end consonance: the **-ck** at the end of “black” and “ducks.” According to Perrine and Arp, these phonetic intensives suggest quick movement.⁴⁰

new moon
the night watchman
goes unseen

*Scott Mason*⁴¹

Here, the repeated ending **-n** sounds give it extra emotional resonance and remind me of the repeated rounds of a night watchman. This consonance adds to the meaning of the poem.

dusk
to darkness
meadow to wood

*John Stevenson*⁴²

The consonance in this haiku is intriguing and deftly performed. The **d**-sound starts as initial alliteration, then transforms into medial and terminal consonance. This creates an effect not unlike the transition from day into night.

Assonance, the repetition at close intervals of vowel sounds, is what Ness calls “vowel rhyme.”⁴³ Gurga writes that assonance is “usually the least obtrusive of the aural devices.”⁴⁴ He further states that it can reinforce a theme without drawing attention to itself.⁴⁵ I think assonance is perhaps the most effective unifier of the more traditional euphonic devices.

morning crescent
 rising from the glen
 the scent of wild fennel

*Chuck Brickley*⁴⁶

Here we hear the **short e** sounds in four different words, “crescent,” “glen,” “scent,” and “fennel.” The repeated sounds help to conjure up wafts of fennel scent.

spring equinox
 the cyclist’s thighs
 scissoring sunlight

*Mary Stevens*⁴⁷

In this poem, we hear the alternating **short** and **long i** sounds, like the cyclist’s thighs pedaling up and down.

Onomatopoeia is a word that, through its sound as well as its sense, represents what it defines.⁴⁸ William Higginson, in *The Haiku Handbook*, claims that “onomatopoeia dramatically unifies a poem.”⁴⁹ Many names of instruments and birds are onomatopoeic, and they are welcome in haiku.

taut tent
 the tympani
 of rain

*Jim Kacian*⁵⁰

Here the name of a musical instrument is onomatopoeic. Kacian also throws in a few more **t-** sounds to emphasize the beat of the tympani.

a peewee keeps calling
 the deep roots
 of weeds

*Allan Burns*⁵¹

The peewee bird is named for its call, hence it acts as onomatopoeia. Burns helps to repeat the peewee's call by using the assonance of the **long e** sounds in "keeps," "deep," and "weeds."

We have seen that traditional poetic sound devices can be used quite successfully in haiku. In my study of haiku that exhibit euphony, I've noticed some other less traditional, but very effective, sound devices. Lyles, in the preface to *To Hear the Rain*, writes that one characteristic of all poetry is "... careful diction with close attention to the denotations, connotations, and associative possibilities of words."⁵² I've found eight other euphonic poetic devices that utilize euphonic denotations, connotations, and associations. I call them Intra-Line Unity, Euphonic Contrast, Completing the Circle, Mash-Up, Moonlighting, Shadow Words, Nesting Dolls, and Anagrams. Let's examine how each of them work.

Sometimes each line of a haiku uses a distinctive sound device, thereby creating its own euphonic thread or intra-line unity.

patio tai chi
a hummingbird's quick sip
at the coral bells

*Julie Warther*⁵³

In line one, we hear the **t** sounds and the **long e** sounds. In line two, we hear two closed syllable words with **short i** sounds at the very end. In line three, we hear the consonance of "coral" and "bells." Each line has its own unifying characteristic that helps to create total poem unity as well.

Sometimes two of the lines in a haiku share a common euphonic thread, while a third line does not, and this can create an effective juxtaposition of sound and mood. Such intra-line unity can be used to create euphonic contrast in a haiku. For example, the last line can sound different than the first two, as in this haiku:

death notice
daylilies divided
for another garden

*Michele Root-Bernstein*⁵⁴

The first two lines of this haiku are full of **d**- sounds. At present, the garden in the poem is the one with daylilies (symbolized by **d**- sounds). The third line does not contain any **d**- sounds, because the prospective garden has yet to receive the transplanted day lilies. The repeated **d**- sounds help to intensify the sadness in the poem. Sometimes, the line that stands on its own is the first one:

honeysuckle
we open jelly jars
for fireflies

*Peggy Willis Lyles*⁵⁵

The first line in this haiku is the only one without alliteration. Then we get to the **j**- alliteration in line two and the **f**- alliteration in line three. So the first line is the one that stands out.

Euphony can also be used to “complete the circle” in a haiku. Sometimes, a haiku feels unified because, in fact, it has been deliberately unified by the use of near rhymes in the first and last words of the poem. The circle of the haiku moment gets cinched, and this can be very emotionally satisfying.

last year’s hostas
our losses
turn to lace

*Peter Newton*⁵⁶

The near rhymes of “last” and “lace” allude to the cycles of growth during the year. This haiku also includes the near rhymes of “hostas” and “losses,” to add to the poem’s resonance.

lilac petals
the wind turns
italic

*Chad Lee Robinson*⁵⁷

In this poem, “lilac” and “italic” are near rhymes. One could also picture the wind scattering the letters in the word “lilac” to form the word “italic.”

A couple of years ago, I started to notice a euphonic process that I was engaging in during my writing, first unconsciously, then more deliberately. I create one part of a haiku, usually the phrase, and then let its sounds, in an almost instinctual way, lead me to associative sounds for the fragment. To do this, I repeat the phrase in my head or out loud, listening to its sounds, shuffling those sounds around, and seeing what tumbles out. The process feels a bit like I am creating a mash-up song, hence I call the poetic device “Mash-Up.” Here’s a haiku that emerged out of this process.

waxing moon
fiddler crabs mob
the mud flats

*Brad Bennett*⁵⁸

I wrote this while visiting Cape Cod. I was looking for the perfect verb to describe the movement of the crabs and I was considering “crawl” and a few other words. I kept reading the words in the poem over to myself. Somehow, the **-b** sound in “crab” and the **m-** sound in “mud” made me think of the word “mob.” I thought it fit well euphonicly and added to the unity of the poem.

We all know that a word in a haiku can do more than one job. Perhaps helping to depict the haiku moment is a word’s day job. The same word, though, can moonlight—it can pick up another job. It can also add euphony and/or emotional resonance to the poem. Often there is one important word in a haiku that is doing the most moonlighting. Here are two examples of this phenomenon.

a jay stuffs more seeds
into its esophagus
last days of summer

*Brad Bennett*⁵⁹

In my first draft, I used the word “crop,” which I thought was the accurate word to describe the storage space in a bird’s throat. But I didn’t like the sound of it. So, I did some research online and found out that it’s not actually a crop that the jay is using as a storage container, it’s actually using a

part of its esophagus. The word “esophagus” was the accurate word, and it also gave me two more *s* sounds and another *f* sound to create more poem unity. I also imagined that the extra *s*'s were being stored in the word “esophagus.” So, the word performed several jobs in my haiku.

street bazaar
the wind lifts a tune
from a terracotta pot

*Alan S. Bridges*⁶⁰

I don't know the history of how Bridges constructed this poem. But he could have used many different descriptors for the pot. The word “terracotta” sounds like a tune the wind might make blowing into or over a pot, so the word served several purposes in the poem: descriptive, semantic, and euphonic.

When we read a haiku, we make connections to memories, emotions, and prior knowledge. We may also make connections to other words that are not even present in the haiku. I've noticed that occasionally a word or a pair of words in a haiku makes me think of another word not in the haiku. The first word and its context can lead me to another word that might sound similar, but is not there. I think this can happen consciously or unconsciously. I call these words “shadow words.”⁶¹ Here are a few examples.

soft serve at the wharf
a sloop coming in
on evening wind

*Hannah Mahoney*⁶²

In this poem, the word “sloop” and the fact that we're being treated to ice cream, led me to think of the word “scoop.” When I took a closer look, I saw the sound and context connection.

April drizzle ...
the long wait
for fried clams

*Jim Laurila*⁶³

In this poem, the word “drizzle,” and the implied sound of clams frying in oil, reminded me of the word “sizzle.” Mahoney and Laurila did not deliberately include these words in these contexts in order to trigger the other words that came to my mind, but it happened nonetheless, and I would argue that it adds semantic meaning to these haiku. Sometimes, I deliberately create a situation where another word might emerge in a reader’s mind. Here’s an example:

creek trickle
a chickadee lands
on my hand

*Brad Bennett*⁶⁴

I used the word “trickle” in hopes that the word “tickle” might fly into a reader’s mind. Perhaps like the chickadee’s feet tickling my palm.

The sounds of word parts can interact in interesting ways. For instance, you can use one word by itself and also as a syllable or part of another longer word. This repetition can create an effect like “nesting dolls” that helps to produce more euphony, unity, and resonance.

snow wind
wringing the tea bag
until it tears

*Robert Gilliland*⁶⁵

In this poem, “tea” is nested in “tear.” The alliteration in the words “tea” and “tear” is also very effective, especially since the second word is altered by just one letter, perhaps like a tea bag being torn open.

a cold cup
from a cold cupboard
morning sun

*Peggy Willis Lyles*⁶⁶

This haiku does something intriguing. The word “cup” is repeated, but the **p**- sound is lost in the word cupboard. This one feels like the cups are nesting, one inside the other.

In some haiku, the letters and sounds in a word or phrase from one line can be used to create a related word with similar sounds in another line. The letters and sounds get rearranged in a way that reminds me of anagrams.

summer dusk
a duck's wake
turns back the waves

*Madelaine Caritas Longman*⁶⁷

If you take four of the letters in “duck’s” and scramble them, you can form the word “dusk.” So, the second line gives us a new way to create the “dusk” that was introduced in the first line.

sunlit silt the marsh rabbit's eyes

*Kristen Lindquist*⁶⁸

If you rearrange some of the letters in “sunlit,” you get “silt.” That pair of words is also an example of near rhyme.

As we've seen, there are many intriguing and intricate ways that phonemes can be played to great effect in our haiku. As long as they are used carefully, deftly, and creatively, they can produce euphony that is not too sing-songy, too heavy-handed, or too forced. The resulting music can sound quite pleasing and create resonance and unity. As Pamela Miller Ness reminds us, “... we need to write with our ears as well as our eyes and minds.”⁶⁹

first awake a lake of mist

*John Stevenson*⁷⁰

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- ³⁸ *Frogpond* 44:1.
- ³⁹ *Seabeck Getaway 2020 Anthology*, forthcoming.
- ⁴⁰ Perrine, Laurence and Thomas R. Arp, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, 199.
- ⁴¹ Mason, Scott. *The Wonder Code*. Chappaqua, NY: Girasole Press, 2017.
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- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

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- ⁴⁷ *Kingfisher* 1.
- ⁴⁸ Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1994, 32.
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- ⁵¹ Burns, Allan. *Distant Virga*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2011.
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- ⁵⁷ *Acorn* 34.
- ⁵⁸ *Mariposa* 41.
- ⁵⁹ Unpublished.
- ⁶⁰ Kaji Aso Haiku Contest 2020.
- ⁶¹ Mary Stevens and I first noticed this phenomenon while workshopping together. The term “shadow word” was coined by Kristen Lindquist during a subsequent conversation.
- ⁶² *Acorn* 45.
- ⁶³ Unpublished.
- ⁶⁴ *New England Letters* 107.
- ⁶⁵ *Frogpond* 26:2.
- ⁶⁶ *Acorn* 20.
- ⁶⁷ *Modern Haiku* 51.3.
- ⁶⁸ *Wales Haiku Journal* Autumn 2021.
- ⁶⁹ Ness, Pamela Miller. “The Poet’s Toolbox: Prosody in Haiku.”
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