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**Creative Work**

## When is a nature note not a nature note?

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In his brief but largely positive review of my 2022 collection *Pathside Weeds in Rain*,<sup>1</sup> my haiku namesake Paul Miller identified “sketches that don’t go beyond close observation” and other poems which “see deeply into things in the Zen-infused way favoured by Hackett and Blyth”.<sup>2</sup> An experienced naturalist as well as a haiku poet, he found it unnecessary to precede “sketches” with an adjective like “mere”, “simple”, or any other negative modifier, in contrast to many current reviewers. Yet the implication remains that such efforts are shallower, somehow, or of a weaker creative pulse than the full-blooded haiku they share a page with, and therefore devalue the whole. As it’s a distinction which interests me keenly, I’d like in what follows to re-examine several of my recent pieces, thinking again about what inspired them and the means I then used to try to pass that along. Any categorising of each I’ll leave up to the reader.

Sunlight through his ears  
but in-between each toe too,  
a hare sits grooming...<sup>3</sup>

I’ve chosen first an example that fits well, or appears to, our current Western definition of the Japanese term *shasei*, made popular there by Shiki Masaoka during his drive to revitalise haiku in the late nineteenth century. Originally meaning “sketch from life” or “drawing and painting without embellishment”, it’s now spread far from its roots in traditional Chinese art to become contemporary English-language haiku’s byword for superficiality. Ironically enough, though, Shiki’s full *shasei* concept was much more nuanced and subtle than we

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<sup>1</sup> *Pathside Weeds in Rain: Haiku by Paul Russell Miller* (Grandad Publishing, 2022). Email [prussmill@proton.me](mailto:prussmill@proton.me) for ordering details.

<sup>2</sup> *Modern Haiku* 53:3 (Autumn 2022), 120. James W. Hackett (1929-2015) was an American pioneer of English-language haiku who advanced both the nature and spiritual traditions of the genre, while R. H. Blyth (1898-1964) remains its foremost non-Japanese historian and commentator.

<sup>3</sup> All of my haiku here are previously unpublished.

today tend to give it credit for, while its most serious shortcomings are almost exclusively the fault of imported European realism rather than his own region's aesthetics.<sup>4</sup>

Long before I got to know haiku or Shiki, I was familiar, through my wildlife illustration background, with *shasei's* venerable T'ang dynasty "ancestor" *hsieh sheng* ("direct painting from life").<sup>5</sup> Associated particularly with the development of China's "bird and flower" tradition,<sup>6</sup> what links it to the haiku I most admire whilst distinguishing it from *shasei* is the following:

In observing the way a bud opens into full flower, eventually to shed its petals, and the conditions under which this process takes place, the painter is exploring an aspect of the *Tao*. He is able to understand the *Tao* when he is thoroughly familiar with every stage of the process, can see it at each stage and as a whole as analogous to other manifestations of the way of nature around him, including himself, and can through his heart and mind become aware of the same pattern of movement and change beyond his own limited horizon, on the scale of the whole earth and, yet beyond, of the whole universe.<sup>7</sup>

Let me make clear I'm not nor ever have been a practising Taoist and I know of no other present-day haiku poets who are, and yet I'm quite sure I'm not alone in finding the above words powerfully resonant, describing the expansiveness than can arise when we give our close, open attention to one small part of the natural world.

The brown hare is in steep decline across many parts of Britain, including my own, and the young male I spotted along a late-May field edge was my first decent sighting of the year. For the third March running I'd not seen a single bout at our local boxing sites, which added both poignancy and vividness to this more relaxed early evening encounter.<sup>8</sup> But what was it exactly, abruptly, that turned it into a haiku experience for me, and does the resulting poem effectively convey it?

I'd been watching the hare for some minutes, drawn to those presence-filled eyes as I always am, when the low sun broke through cloud and in one great wave, without warning, flowed over the hedge. The hare's ears along with every grassblade became translucent,

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Trumbull's essay "Masaoka Shiki and the Origins of Shasei" in *Juxta Two* (The Haiku Foundation, 2016), 87-122, investigates both the concept and Shiki's use of it in some depth, but with an important postscript added to qualify certain assumptions.

<sup>5</sup> I first came across the term while reading Professor Max Loehr's *The Great Painters of China* (Phaidon Press, 1980) as an art student in Wales.

<sup>6</sup> Three decades later, and by strange circular coincidence, the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff mounted *Nature's Song: Chinese Bird and Flower Paintings* (January-April 2017) to celebrate 600 years of the genre.

<sup>7</sup> Mai-Mai Sze, *The Tao of Painting: A study of the Ritual Disposition of Chinese Painting* (Princeton University Press / Bollingen Foundation, 1963), 41.

<sup>8</sup> *The Leaping Hare* by George Ewart Evans & David Thomson (Faber, 1972) ranges through natural history, archaeology, folklore, literature and art in pursuit of this elusive animal.

and I was struck again with force by just what an elegant expression this sleek creature is of its exposed, open-sky environment. He immediately straightened a little to better enjoy the sun's warmth, raising one long limb then another to be groomed but grooming as well I now saw, as an agent not of meadow health only but planetary health and galactic health, the incoming light itself.

Both in China where it began and its later adoption and adaption by Japan, "bird and flower" art's compositions tend to be even more selective than its subject range. In many, a bird or birds will either be perched on or in flight around a flowering plant or tree, arranged in close-up against an entirely empty background. The results may seem merely decorative at times, or "sketches that don't go beyond close observation", indeed, but very seldom are such surfaces unattached to what's beneath, if we approach with respect.

It felt essential, accordingly, to let the hare *be* in my poem, presenting him directly to the reader and hoping the words I chose to do so reveal his significance without disturbing him. "Sunlight", the initial catalyst, opens line one and casts its beams upon what can be seen as a straightforward portrait. In which vowel-consonant interplay, including alliteration and rhyme, attempts across all three following lines to emphasise the animal's rhythmic movements. And the deeper and wider implications of those movements emerge only if the word "through" is read as "because of" or "by the agency of", sending out appropriately quiet praise for the brown hare's role in keeping everything in trim.

The bone-dry meadow...  
 under hedge shade, bills agape,  
 three juvenile crows

As an indisputable mark of what's authentic, juxtaposition is embedded in contemporary haiku much like security strips run through banknotes. The dramatic "cut" it can create, which joins a poem's first image to a seemingly unrelated second one, is viewed by many as the genre's key feature. Historically speaking, this is a fairly gross over-simplification, but the effect of its current acceptance can mean that other poetic approaches are either belittled or even dismissed.<sup>9</sup>

To juxtapose, according to the dictionary, is to "place (a thing) beside another", and explains succinctly why in haiku terms it almost never occurs in my work. I'm completely uninterested, regardless of effect, in *placing* anything inside a poem myself and whatever may meet and interact there has done so already in far more compelling real life. John Clare's famous admission that "I found the poems in the fields / And only wrote them

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<sup>9</sup> In her *Aware — A Haiku Primer* (Portal Publications, 1980), Betty Drevniok suggests the "SOMETHING that draws the poet is always noticed in context with something else", and may be as close to a haiku fundamental as we should seek. Our relationship with those two somethings can then determine what we make and the technical methods we *choose* from the genre's options.

down” resulted from clarity not humility, and is something always to strive for, I feel.<sup>10</sup>

The fields throughout my home district were probably the most drought-ridden I’ve ever known them last summer, with one cloudless dawn after another promising only more of the same. Many exhausted adult birds had withdrawn from view now to concentrate on moulting, but the almost equal absence of their offspring began to raise serious concern. In this odd and ominous stillness, one early afternoon, I noticed what I thought were three soft pink hedge-bottom flowers, all trembling slightly despite the obvious lack of breeze. It took very nearly a further full minute before my eyes adjusted sufficiently to separate dark feathers from deep shade and, together, the youngsters slowly morphed into shape.

Haikai arts down the centuries have generally behaved better toward the crow than their various wider societies have — but not nearly better enough. From Basho himself in Tokugawa-era Japan to the much-missed Martin Lucas in modern Britain, we still can’t seem to resist sometimes dressing our worst traits up in its black clothes.<sup>11</sup> “Things are symbols of themselves”, Chogyam Trungpa once memorably said,<sup>12</sup> but I’d like respectfully to go one further and recommend that last unhelpful weight is lifted as well, setting things symbol-free.

A natural confluence of events, rather than image juxtaposition, provides the basis for most of my haiku — deadly weather conditions in this case and a perception-changing encounter with three young corvids at risk of being carrion themselves. Their heat-releasing mouths were also the landscape’s liveliest feature, however, a small hint of positive change I thought it important the poem too should hold. So hard consonants dominate and stifle until that wide second extended “a” of “agape”, at which vowel sounds at last gain ascendance allowing the birds on line three to breathe more easily.

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<sup>10</sup> From Clare’s poem “Sighing for Retirement”, in *The Later Poems of John Clare*, Volume 1, edited by Eric Robinson & David Powell (Clarendon Press, 1984), 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> I’m thinking here of such poems as Basho’s

*Higoro nikumu karasu mo yuki no ashita kana*

Normally hateful,  
 yet even the crow somehow...  
 early morning snow (my translation)

and Martin Lucas’s

night falls  
 on the mountain road —  
 a murder of crows (from *Earthjaz*, Ram Publications, 2003)

<sup>12</sup> Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987) was a Tibetan Buddhist teacher, poet, artist and founder of Naropa University. Several of his notable sayings, including this one, appear in Allen Ginsberg’s *Mind Writing Slogans* (Limberlost Press, 1994).

Boot-swish by boot-swish,  
more and more ejected seed  
sprouts grasshopper wings...

I'm always very pleased to call my life and work pedestrian, raising a quizzical smile usually from those who aren't sure how serious I'm being. But I count myself genuinely lucky in our auto-addicted age to have had no other transport available to me often than my own two legs and feet. Henry Thoreau, as he watched his far slower age catch speed, wrote the following about the value of taking a walk each day:

An absolutely new prospect is a great happiness, and I can still get this any afternoon... There is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles' radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the threescore years and ten of human life. It will never become quite familiar to you.<sup>13</sup>

Seasonal change for me, much more than route variation, leads to the harmony and new prospects Thoreau identifies here. It guarantees no walk I'm on is truly repeatable, really, and that the person returning home is never the same as the one who left.

Grasshoppers chirping and then leaping at our approach are two of the quintessential ingredients of high summer meadowland in Britain. Their numbers across the fields appear to undulate through the season, caused perhaps by a synchronous shedding of skin as young nymphs grow slowly into adults. Many grass and grasshopper species reach fruition at similar times, then, with the effect that when they're kicked loose it can seem like it's seed and chaff which take to wing.<sup>14</sup>

Because I use deep-trodden footpaths, often, linked by deeply-grooved old stone stiles, one of my inner kicks as a walker is knowing the long historical line of field-faring women and men I've joined. From there, a winding route to our earliest upright forebears opens, back through the scrub and savannah life they interacted with as they travelled. So amongst the word-repetition and sibilance used to track action and sound in this haiku, I hope some implicit ecological, evolutionary notes are heard.

Vintage pre-war hay...  
where the tractor, turning, shaved  
some set-aside verge

Across the hills, fields and woods I've known as home for some eighteen years now,

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<sup>13</sup> From "Walking", in *Wild Apples and Other Natural History Essays by Henry D. Thoreau*, edited by William Rossi (University of Georgia Press, 2002), 64.

<sup>14</sup> The hoppers "sprouting" wings in this case were rufous grasshoppers (*Gomphocerippus rufus*), a small uniformly brown and so even more seed-like species.

tentative signs suggest our *aggro*-cultural practices may be changing slightly — I’ll put it no more strongly than that. Some local farms flail their hedges less severely and less often than they did, allowing birds the full benefit of autumn fruits and fuller nest-cover come the spring.<sup>15</sup> Alongside those hedgerows, too, strips of land are being left to produce entirely what they will, attracting pollinating insects in numbers and kinds quite new to me.

I used to stand by the mower and follow the scythe sweeping down thousands of the broad-flowered daisies, the knotted knapweeds, the blue scabious, the yellow rattles, sweeping so close and true that nothing escaped; and yet, although I had seen so many hundreds of each, although I had lifted armfuls day after day, still they were fresh. They never lost their newness, and even now whenever I gather a wild flower it feels a new thing.<sup>16</sup>

In 1885, looking back wistfully even then to a far richer, wilder childhood, Richard Jefferies puts my notions of newness and abundance very firmly in their place. The improvements I’ve started to notice are strictly marginal in every sense, and unless an integrated scene of the sort he describes can be returned to, we have a very poor future in store. Signs of hope ought to be cheered on when and wherever they’re found, however, including this small accidental bouquet.

Alliteration and punctuation point up the action once again, with the tractor’s turn underlined by those “t” sounds then the line-bridging sibilance which follows. The poem’s first line arrived complete as I stood admiring the flowers in the swathe, so not until later did questions arise about what “pre-war” in this context meant. Both world wars, of course, brought seismic changes to farming as to so much else, but might it precisely be to our ongoing war with nature that the term here refers? Or to the war we now need to wage on our profligate former selves, perhaps?<sup>17</sup>

Tom Sacramona, in another review of *Pathside Weeds in Rain*, suggests the book contains “many poems incorporating *sono mama*, a rare transcendent quality in haiku”<sup>18</sup> related to

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<sup>15</sup> I’ve watched often as the opposite took place during the recent past, and able to do nothing except write a haiku about it:

Up, after the birds  
go the berries, shedding juice —  
September hedge-flail                      (*Pathside Weeds in Rain*, 89)

<sup>16</sup> Richard Jefferies, from his essay “Wild Flowers”, in *The Open Air* (Chatto & Windus, 1885), 34-35.

<sup>17</sup> Two recent books by George Monbiot, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea and Human Life* (Allen Lane, 2013) and *Regenesis: Feeding the World without Devouring the Planet* (Allen Lane, 2022), offer much toward the kind of radical re-balancing we urgently require. George would almost certainly label me a “primitivist”, however, as I’m far more sceptical than he about the positive role high technology will play.

<sup>18</sup> *Frogpond* 45:2 (Spring-Summer 2022), 177-178.

something's "isness" or "suchness". And *if* achieved what that's transcendent of specifically, when it comes to haiku experiences and haiku composition, is the compulsive urge many of us have to immediately whisk a subject off and make a reductionist metaphor or juxtaposed image from it. Suchness, according to Buddhologist Sallie B. King, is "the conjunction of persons correctly perceiving the world as it is, and the world presenting itself to persons as it is",<sup>19</sup> in all its endlessly varied and constantly renewing unity.

As I keep on trying to approach that state, I'm more than happy to have my poems accepted as notes, sketches, little songs or just snippets of news I hope may be of interest to someone else:

A scent-message, sent  
by the wasp who struck my face —  
ivy's in flower!

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<sup>19</sup> Sallie B. King, *Buddha Nature* (SUNY Press, 1991), 102-103.