

beauty askew

notes from a haiku writer's life



BY JOHN BRANDI

The spare, high desert of New Mexico—its apparent and often illusory emptiness, its blinding bowl of light—encourages one to write with an economy of words. The eye follows winding arroyos, roadrunner tracks, cloud shadows, and blowing seed; the breath gathers momentum along ridges, faults, and prehistoric waterlines. Fossils scatter at the feet, clay shards glisten after a sudden rain. On storm-washed chips of prehistoric pottery, abstract designs come clear: a figure here, a zigzag there, a water ripple, an animal track, the pinch of an artisan's fingers. I am reminded of Sappho's poems: fragments, mysterious and striking to the eye, missing something essential but somehow made more essential because of what's missing.

I have lived in New Mexico nearly forty years, painting, gardening, hiking the backcountry, writing poems, and practicing the art of haiku—the world's shortest poetic form. Besides being a good way to appreciate nature, haiku provides the perfect remedy against our full-throttle obsession with doing things quickly, getting answers fast. The practice demands that you slow down, become small, get down on your knees, bring your eyes to the hairs of a caterpillar, your ears to the rasping insect in a cracked adobe wall, your nose to the waft of crushed juniper berries after a hard rain. There's another function of haiku, too. It brings us into the transient, cyclic world of the seasons, the birth/death rounds of plants, insects, the backyard garden, the very human who tends it.



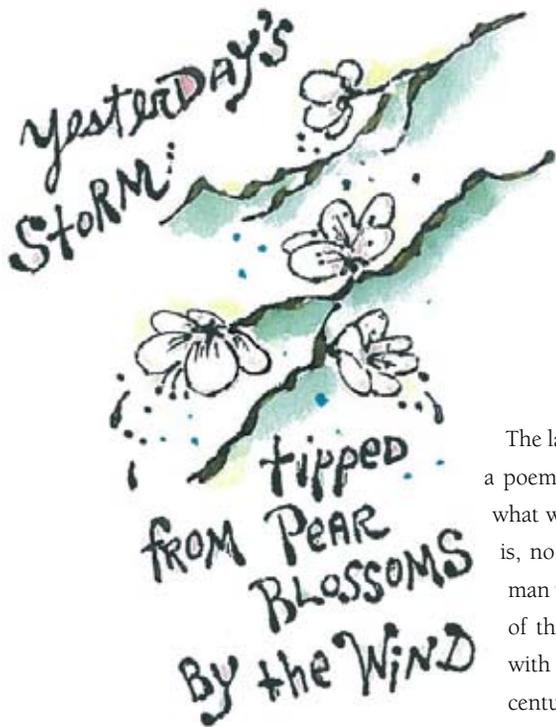
Waterbirds
turn in the rain

I stop
now & then, to miss you
—& to pretend.



John Brandi
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fragments,
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My “haiku eye” opens whenever I relax into a state of “unreadiness”—no mind, no intellect in the way of what is present in any given moment. As I stop, breathe in, exhale, step away from the tangles of the mind—the past I am remembering, the future I am inventing—and step out the door, I may be awakened to a delicate surprise:

yesterday's storm
tipped from pear blossoms
by the wind

On the other hand, I may open the door to something unexpected that interrupts an otherwise serene evening. Even this interruption I must accept as part of the present moment; I must be totally there with it:

spring evening—
all the way down the mountain
a car backfires.

The late Raymond Carver told himself in a poem: “Put it all in, make use.” This is what we do when we accept the world as is, no avoidance, no denial. Walt Whitman wrote, “Bring all the art and science of the world and baffle and humble it with one spear of grass.” Seventeenth-century haiku master Matsuo Bashō, on his famous 1689 Japan walkabout, brushed this haiku into his notebook:

the beginning of poetry
a rice-planting song
in the back country

Both poets remind us that we are part of an intricately woven community of plants, soils, grasses, waters, and animals that in-

habit watershed after watershed, knowing no political boundary. We belong to other peoples, too, ones who speak other languages on other continents who share the same human emotions connected to situations of love, loss, and longing. Often, though, it is not until a tragedy occurs that we are drawn together and realize the fragility of our existence. Who was it who said:

if the world
is so beautiful, why are we
not beautiful in it?

One of the purposes of haiku is to convey beauty, but it is a beauty askew of the norm, less obvious to the eye. Haiku doesn't abide by standards of perfection. It isn't interested in the over-trimmed garden. It goes for rough edges, the wild tangle: a gourd vine unfurling from the compost, a spark from a shovel as it hits a stone, a breeze-bobbing cat whisker caught on an axe blade, an errant whorl in smooth grain, a cricket singing from the corner mop. In a passage from *Specimen Days*, Whitman conveys his love of overlooked beauty. Instead of places like Yellowstone and Niagara Falls that “afford the greatest natural shows,” he is drawn to America's grasslands. “The prairies and plains, while less stunning at first sight, last longer, fill the esthetic sense fuller, precede all the rest.”

For the artist or philosopher, beauty is to be rendered and discussed, but for those living in beauty, it is simply part of life. When I lived in the mountains of Mora, I asked my neighbor Antonio if he thought his surroundings were beautiful. He gave me a knowing look and kept on shucking blue corn. We were outside sitting on a tarp—his wife, her elder brother, and three children—all sharing the task. The sun had

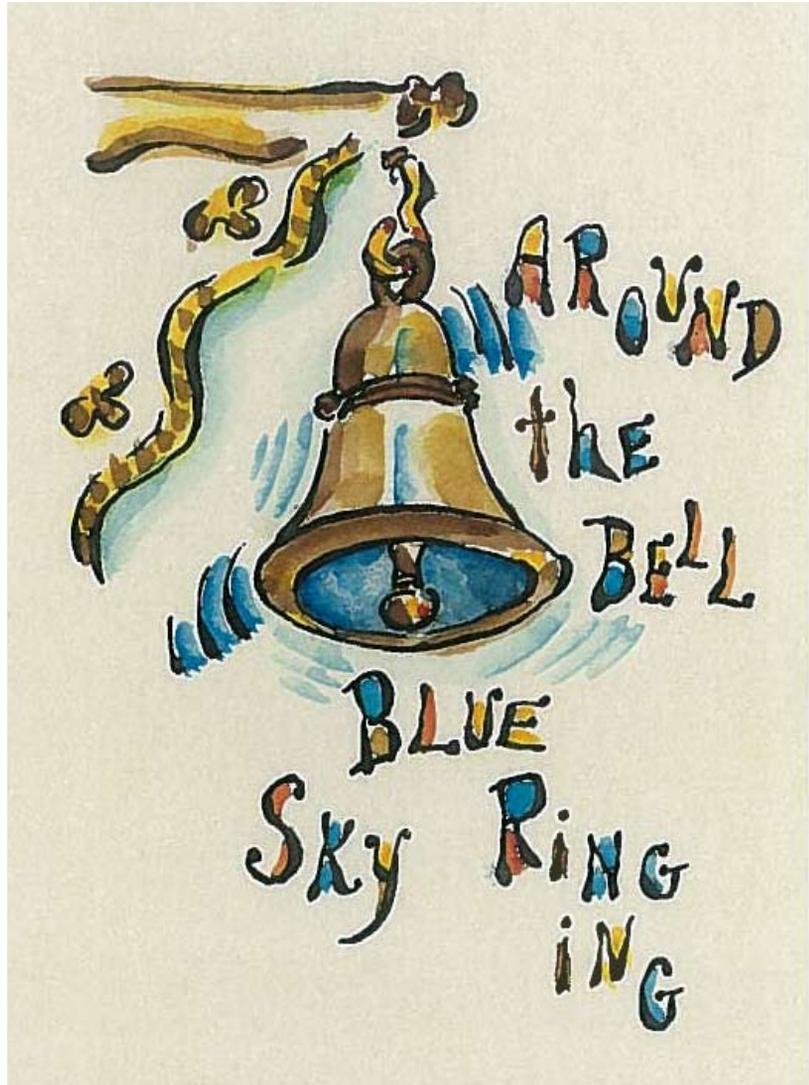
set, and I was wondering how much shucking we could get done before dark. Suddenly, Antonio's twelve-year-old granddaughter stopped shucking and said, "Ohhh, look!" A full moon was rising over the mesa, its yellow glow radiating into lilac dusk. The unspoken beauty of the moment bound all of us as we briefly halted our task in silent appreciation. A haiku written by Bashō 300 years ago echoes this moment:

the peasant's child
 husking rice, stops
 and gazes at the moon

At least once in a lifetime we are given an experience in the natural world that sets us back on our heels. I once walked out of the muted light of a Zen sitting room in the Jemez Mountains, astounded to find myself under a dome of sky so blue it was almost black. A delicate, chiming vibration passed through me. Perhaps it was sounding from the wind-bell under the eave. But when I looked to the imagined source, I found:

around the bell
 blue sky
 ringing

Georgia O'Keeffe, Arthur Dove, and Emily Carr painted these ringing "energy fields" on their canvases. When it comes to language that replicates such energy fields, it is the haiku writer who paints a picture with words and compresses it into a poem. In addition to Bashō, the Japanese poets Chiyo-ni, Buson, and Issa are among the early haiku masters—excellent sources from which to begin. On our own soil, the late Santa Fe poet, Elizabeth Searle Lamb, wrote many accomplished haiku that concisely present that sudden jolt that often

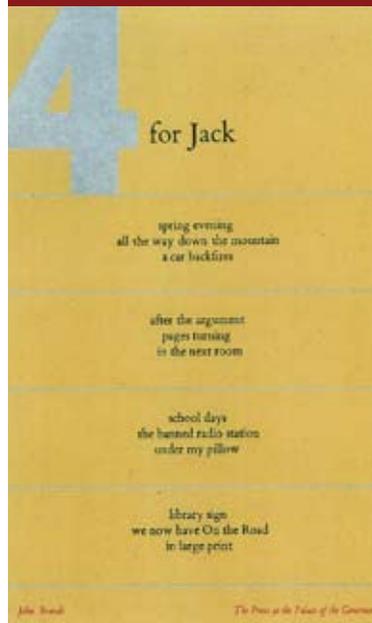


transports us from the personal to the intimate to the universal. One that I'll always remember:

pausing
 halfway up the stair—
 white chrysanthemums

The author is stopped by the presence of mums in full bloom. The white, clustered petals cause her to halt, and, not ponder, but experience a moment of transcendence. She does not include herself in the poem, nor mention her own emotions. But we are aware that the incident has caused her to realize, during her busy day, that there is

a figure here,
 a zigzag there, a
 water ripple, an
 animal track, the
 pinch of an artisan's
 fingers.



beauty in the world. The chrysanthemums have brought her outside her thinking, her doing, whatever she might have just heard on the news. The world is great, and this greatness has been made known by the smallness of the flowers. Haiku present a significant moment amid everything transient—a split second in which things are profound, yet without meaning.

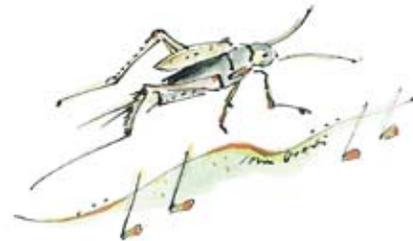
A haiku by New Mexico poet Renée Gregorio portrays another jolt:

not the 14,000 foot summit
 but the breath
 finding origin

I like to imagine that before she climbed the summit, she watched the mountain loosen its veils of mist and float under the stars. Or that camped by a river, she extinguished her lantern, and the roar of a stream, there all the time, suddenly filled the night; but when the sun rose and the cold air warmed, the roar suddenly vanished. Any of these events would be worthy of a haiku, but it is the peak that the poet is focused on. The trail is steep, the switchbacks exhausting, the talus unforgiving. In the act of climbing, amid stress and distress, there comes a surprise. The destination disappears. There is no self, no mountain, only “the breath finding origin.”

Several years ago I had the pleasure of walking the mountains of New Mexico with the Japanese poet, Nanao Sakaki, a true wanderer in the tradition of Bashō. Nanao lived below Taos Mountain in very primitive conditions. We often hiked above timberline, sometimes taking a deliberately difficult route. A stanza from one of his poems is forever popping into my head; it replicates the surprise in Renée Gregorio’s poem:

*Crickets Sing
 to teach
 the Breeze.*



There is no mountain
 nor myself.
 Something
 moves up and down
 in the air.

The haiku poet lives for the unexpected turn, a sudden shift in reality when self is missing and universe comes forward. Sometimes there is a moment of serious insight:

now that fallen leaves
 have buried the path
 the trail is clear

Sometimes the moment is laughable: a gust carries a hat from your head—the hat you weren’t wearing at all. Always, it is a great joy when poems happen not at the desk, but while splitting wood, waiting for the bus, or searching the weeds for a lost pair of glasses. Once, upset after a heavy wind blew down a section of my fence line, I carried my annoyance right out into the fields with my toolbox and gloves, only to find:

the blown over fence
 violets bobbing
 between the rails

A few days later, I opened a letter from a fellow poet living in California’s Sierra Ne-

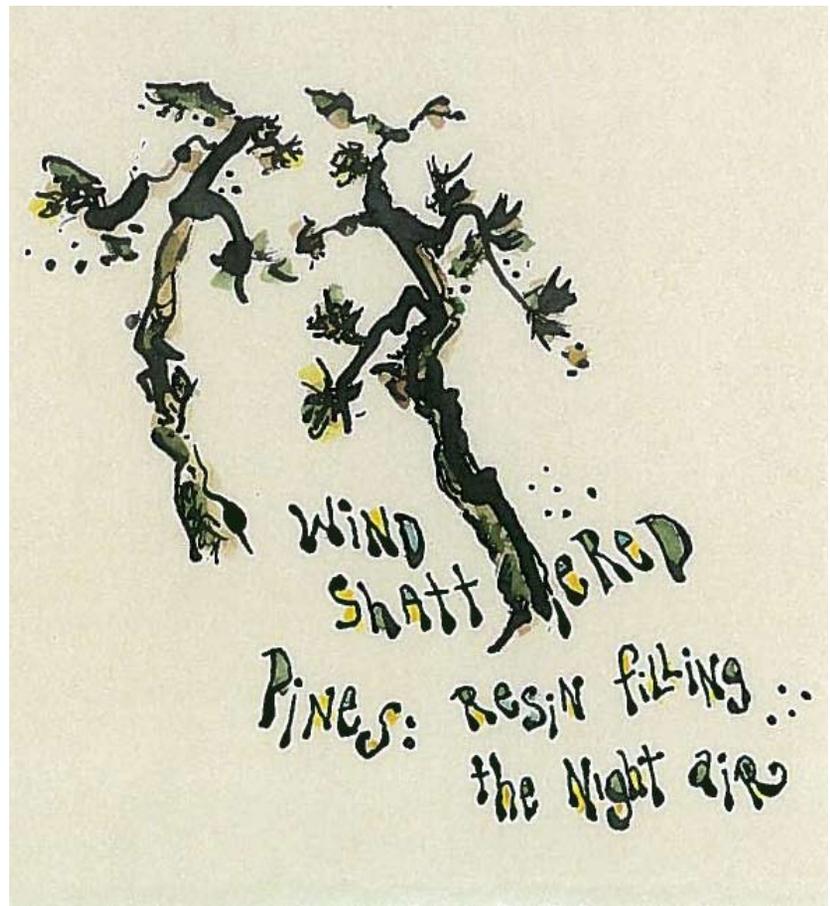
vada Mountains. He included a haiku referring to the same storm. Days earlier it had pounded his own ridge before sweeping into New Mexico:

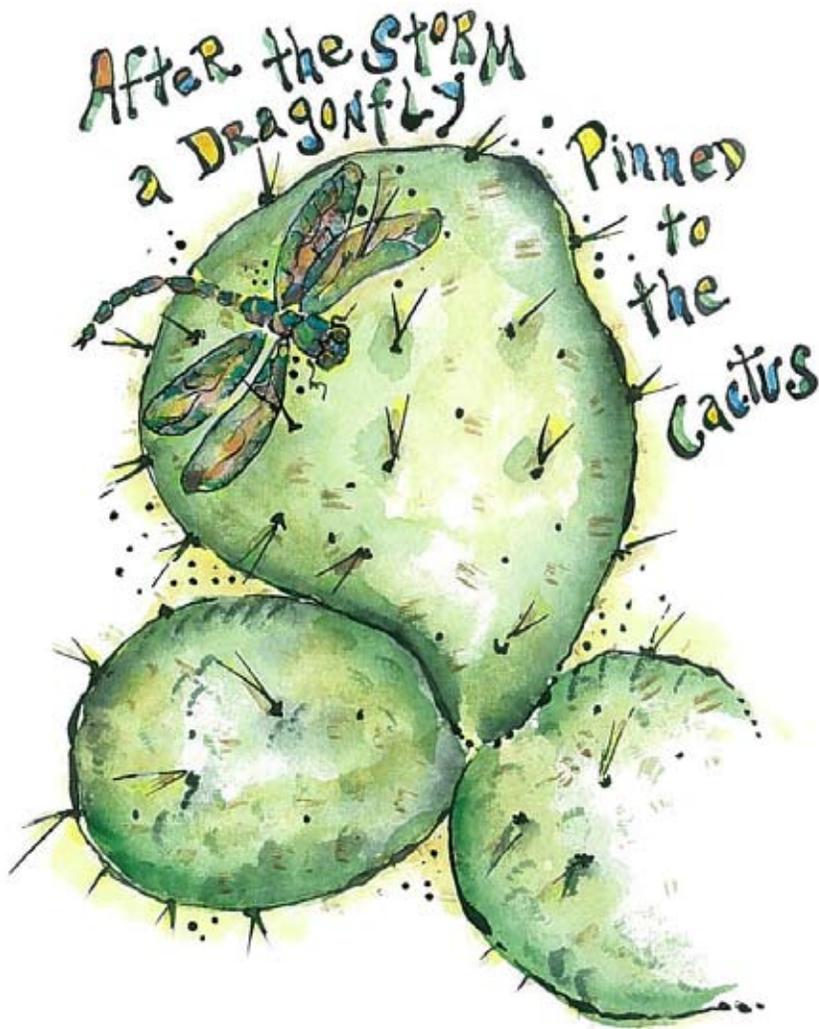
wind shattered pines:
resin filling
the night air

Haiku finds its origin in the twelfth-century practice of *renga*, a Japanese literary game where participants spontaneously composed verses, linking them as they went around the table (a little sake often helped). The poet who opened the *renga* made up a *hokku*, a seventeen-syllable poem usually having a *kigo* (seasonal word) and a leap of surprise. The next person bounced off the opening verse with a fourteen-syllable rejoinder, which did not add lines to the *hokku*, but provided a distinct new verse inspired by its imagery. And so it went, from seventeen- to fourteen- to seventeen-syllable poems, as far into the evening as stamina (and the sake) would allow.

By the seventeenth century, the opening stanza of *renga* had become liberated. But a seasonal word and a leap of surprise were still required, and it had to form a complete picture—sans emotion, metaphor, or human presence. Keeping the poem to seventeen syllables (sound increments) was also required. Matsuo Bash mastered this form, infusing *hokku* with new sensitivity and imagery. Interestingly enough, during his time the word “haiku” was unknown. It did not come about until the young haiku reformer, Shiki, coined it in the twentieth century: *hai*, unusual; *ku*, verse. Japanese haiku were usually printed in one vertical column, but translated into English they were often published as three lines, making visible the five-seven-five syllable count.

Most modern haiku writers don't adhere to the traditional Japanese form. A seventeen-syllable requirement rule can turn a simple image in English into a clumsy one. It encourages unnecessary adjectives; descriptions become awkward; the added weight causes the picture to sag, the spark to dim. The new rule is: “keep it short.” The *kigo*, or seasonal word, has also been questioned. In Japan there are *kigo* dictionaries to aid the poet in writing seasonal poems. But these dictionaries don't work for haiku writers in other lands. What if you live in Cairo, Micronesia, Reykjavik, or Tesuque? New Mexico's dry crackle of summer monsoons, its roadrunner, arroyo, ocotillo, blue corn, and chamisa are unique indicators of our environment.





The flies are part of our world, too, busy celebrating the seasons just as we are. In spring I welcome that first buzzing sound with an open door. By the end of summer I've lost my patience; the flies seem to have moved into every crack of the ceiling boards. Seasons are given high priority in traditional Japanese haiku, but modern haiku writers often pay attention to the seasons of the heart—moods in the psyche triggered during seasonal changes. They allow a particular event in nature to resonate with an emotional event. This haiku by Steve Sanfield aptly stands on its own for exactly what it is, but it also reverberates with an inner cold, an ache found not in the bones, but in the heart:

The naked trees
make it colder
—this autumn moon.

A haiku by Penny Harter, a Santa Fe resident for many years, also stands complete as is; but on a second take it could also imply a personal rebirth after a season of hardship:

after the storm
a dragonfly
pinned to the cactus

snowmelt—
on the banks of the torrent
small flowers

In this haiku I wanted to be true to the sequence of events exactly as they unfolded; I wanted to include subject, action, and a quick-flash line to complete the picture. The final line “detonates” the rest of the poem; it provides the exact surprise as I experienced it, one that resonates long after the poem is read. Here is another haiku, written inside the house rather than outside:

Along the sill
sunshine moving
on the fly's back.

The juxtaposition of delicate, upward-sprouting flowers with the river's powerful, horizontal churn provides an amazingly provocative picture. Nothing contrived or imagined, no clever, invented imagery. The flowers, the torrent, the river shore, the melting snow are natural presences, there all the time, noticed or unnoticed—except that this time the poet happened along, senses tuned, receptive to the moment. This is the practice of poetry.

Whenever I experience a jolt that instant-

Water seeps through
stone as we sleep.
Coyotes herald
daybreak with a
Charlie Parker riff.

ly triggers a complete picture into place, I try to stay with the imagery, let the details roll inside my mouth like smooth pebbles. I walk further into the world, scribble a line or two, and a poem forms. Eventually my pocket pad brightens with haiku. When I re-enter the realm of mundane practicalities—roof to repair, teeth to fix, bills to pay—these haiku offer calm direction when re-read, and re-lived. They become a trail of stepping-stones that gets me across the larger waters of tangled thoughts and emotional sidetracks. They bring me back to a slower moment, a transformative one. Haiku: so tiny, yet as footholds they provide enormous balance. Each stone shines like a mirror, triggering light into the larger, darker mind. A mind filled with thought doesn't see what the empty mind does.

that fallen flower
returning to the branch
was a butterfly.
(Moritake, 1452–1540)

We write poems to stay alive, to see where we've been, to give clearing for the next step. A deep surprise, a gong-rattling clonk, a giddy bafflement, a quiet revelation of the mysterious in the everyday: these zaps of primal, uninhibited delight are the seeds of haiku. Often frayed and threadbare, haiku are not concerned with lasting beauty, but with a significant moment amid everything transient—a split second in which things are profound, yet without meaning.



such small sounds . . .
the silence of the night
deepens
(Elizabeth Searle Lamb)

Full of abandonment, precise in their communication, haiku are to be savored, as is the full moon on an empty belly. Living in the world with the haiku eye keeps the world new. Water seeps through stone as we sleep. Coyotes herald daybreak with a Charlie Parker riff. Long after the raven flies, its shadow remains on the wall. Outside, the snow falls; inside, the nightgown on the chair is warm. What is familiar is suddenly renewed. The sameness, the difference, is one. Haiku expresses the ineffable magic of this unity. It captures and releases the light of a world that disappears as quickly as it arrives. I put down the pen, noticing that the clouds have darkened. A moist breeze fills the room. On the sandstone path,

a raindrop.
Inside it another
has fallen. ■

John Brandi, a native of California and a long-time New Mexican, first published his poems in hand-sewn mimeograph editions in the 1960s. Since then his haiku, haibun, poetry, and prose have been published worldwide. His paintings have been exhibited in one-man shows in Santa Fe and throughout the United States. As founder of Tooth of Time Books, he issued the first books of several poets who have become internationally recognized. Brandi will present a lecture titled "Beauty Askew: Notes from a Haiku Writer's Life" under the sponsorship of The Press at the Palace of the Governors at the Stewart L. Udall Museum Resources Building, in Santa Fe, in January 2009.



No backwards,
no forwards
in the November
rain.