

Journey Through Casualty: Terry Ann Carter's *Tokaido*

Tokaido is a book comprised of haibun written by Terry Ann Carter. Carter wrote *Tokaido* in June of 2017 while her husband was fighting cancer and ended up losing his life. This book goes through her journey of being his support system and how the cancer not only affected him, but everyone else around him. Tokaido is a road in Japan that is 319.4 miles long in length. Similar to how long the road of Tokaido is, Carter's journey with her husband and his loss of life is a long, strenuous journey as well. She also found inspiration from Utagawa Hiroshige who traveled Tokaido in 1832. Hiroshige produced 53 stations of woodcut prints which depicted the difference in surroundings on the long road of Tokaido and what Hiroshige could capture through his own personal experiences on this journey. In *Tokaido*, Carter wrote 53 haibun to represent her own personal 53 "stations" on her journey through mourning the loss of her husband. Through *Tokaido*, Carter is able to tell a chronological story from beginning to end, with love and loss, mourning and joy, and the discussion of how one copes with the casualty of a loved one.

Another reason I chose to discuss Carter's *Tokaido* is because of my own personal connection with the text. One idea we discussed in class, was the concept of forming personal connections to the haiku we read allowing us to place ourselves in the shoes of the author. My senior year of high school, my mother was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer in both of her breasts. She was lucky enough to not have it spread through her lymph nodes, but the doctors still found it very late in the cell production and cancerous cells were multiplying faster than they could start procedures and surgeries. My entire family felt the effects of the cancer while she was going through endless surgeries, chemotherapy treatments, and an increasing decline in her health for 2 years, but last May she was able to ring the cancer free bell at the Chemo Center back home. Although my mom's journey is different than Carter's husband's, there are quite a few parallels between their two journeys. Receiving *Tokaido* in class, was a godsend and I thoroughly enjoyed reading and learning about Carter's own personal journey dealing with the loss of a loved one due to cancer.

The first haibun I will be discussing is a few pages into her book. It stuck out to me for many reasons, but primarily because of one word: suicide.

night without stars
so much talk
of suicide

Tokaido, Carter, 19

To begin looking at this haiku, I first took in account the appearance of it. Normally, when an author uses less words with each line, they are trying to get the reader to focus on the last line or a singular word – with this haiku it is the word suicide. Looking at the first line of this haiku, I picture a completely black sky. Dark black skies are always a little bit depressing because when one is outside looking up at the night sky, we long to see the sky consumed with constellations and stars because within stars there is an essence of hope. People wish upon stars, and use stars to guide them while travelling. Starting a haiku with this line is automatically a sign of despair or a lack of hope. Then we get to the infamous word of suicide and the fact that there is "so much talk" about it is even more a sign of desperation due to a gloomy state of mind.

This haiku is the aftermath of his diagnosis and the beginning of an extensive journey they are not sure how to approach yet. I know with my mother, she was completely in shock when she found out about her diagnosis and her and my father did not even tell us, the kids, for weeks until they had a steady plan of

action. I never saw how she first reacted, I do not even know if suicide was a thought for her, but I also do not have the liberty to say that the thought of suicide did not run through her mind at least once. Carter's husband was probably questioning everything. He probably felt nothing but despair and saw no hope for his future and it is easy to get down on yourself when you have a diagnosis such as cancer. As a spouse, I cannot even imagine what Carter might have been going through. There was nothing she could say or do that would change his diagnosis, all she could do is be there for him, but even that is hard when all you can think about is losing the love of your life.

deep space
what we keep from our children
what they keep from us

Tokaido, Carter, 22

A deep space... just those two simple words can paint various and expansive pictures in anyone's mind. When reading those words, I automatically picture a dark endless hole that goes on forever which I cannot even attempt to see the other side of it. The next few lines hit me really hard. I took this two different ways and the first way I read it was as if they don't quite know how to tell their children that their father has cancer, so they're holding off telling them the news. They're waiting until they have a plan set in stone concerning the steps, they should proceed with dealing with treatments, surgeries, etc. The other way I took it was that they're hiding how they're going through this process. As a parent, I feel like there is this burden placed on you which makes you feel as if you have to be the rock or strong without any wavering for your kids. Parents want to be okay, so their children can come to them when they're not okay, but I feel like this has the opposite effect on children. Children learn from actions, not from words and even if a parent says they're okay, yet a child can see the dark circles under their eyes, the lack of eating, and the worry within their eyes, children are going to see they're not okay. This leads to children concealing how they feel because if their parents don't talk about what they're going through, why should they? This leads me to the line about what children keep from their parents. A lot of times, teenagers act out even without a traumatic event occurring in their life, but when something as big as your father being diagnosed with cancer occurs there is even more reason to act out or rebel. Lack of communication is a frequent occurrence when traumatic events occur, and she captures that very idea with this simple haibun.

When my mother was diagnosed with cancer, I wanted to show her somehow that I cared and loved her, but I didn't exactly know how to express my love for her enough. I knew words weren't enough, nor a card, or even a song – because I had been writing songs to express how I felt for a while at this point, but I still wanted to express my love and concern for her even more. This led me to getting a tattoo in her honor. My mom has never been a fan of tattoos or piercings, so I knew in some way she wouldn't react well, but I wanted to be reminded of the hardships and journey that not only my mom went through, but also my entire family. I wanted a reminder of how strong she was and her ability to overcome anything put in her way. This leads me to Carter's next haiku about her son's tattoo:

first glimpse
of my son's tattoos
the overheard screeching of crows

Tokaido, Carter, 30

The first time I read through this haiku, I perceived Carter's reaction to her son's tattoo as a halting sight. I believe this tied back to her previous haiku discussing what parents and children choose to keep from one another. Clearly her son got this tattoo without his parents knowing. Maybe it was a cry for attention because they had been too caught up with the cancer and treatments or maybe it was just a careless act put into play on a wild night with his friends. Either way, this is yet another reaction to Terry Carter's husband diagnostic of cancer and how it can upset an entire family and how they function on a day to day basis. The

crows Carter discusses in the end line of this poem are possibly the thoughts or noises she was hearing when glancing at the tattoo for the first time. Although this was my first interpretation of the poem, I couldn't help but relate it back to when I got a tattoo for my own mother during her chemo treatments. My mother probably heard something close to crows screeching when she saw my tattoo, but that was because I believe the reality of her cancer was finally sinking in. The fact that her cancer was to the point of being so life-threatening that I got a tattoo in memory and honor of her, brought the reality of her state to the forefront.

cannabis treatment center
cherry blossoms
spiral down

Tokaido, Carter, 31

As time passes, cancer tends to get worse before it can get better or it just precedingly gets worse and you do whatever you can to ease the pain. Luckily in our day in age we can find herbal medicines that aren't addictive or have negative effects on the body. Within this haiku, Carter discusses a cannabis treatment center which a lot of cancer patients use to deal with the pain and lack of hunger when going through chemotherapy treatments. My aunt Kathy was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer and would bathe in CBD (a cannabis product) bath salts to ease her body aches before she passed. In this haiku, Carter is showing, how when dealing with cancer, you question every option that could help benefit and ease the process. The cherry blossoms spiraling down also represent how time has passed and in time passing one can only assume that his cancer is getting worse with each day, especially with her use of the words "spiral down".

This next haiku deals with all the worries and extreme concerns people have when dealing with any sort of diagnosis. When you get an extreme diagnosis it's hard not to feel like the world is ending.

his doctor
reassures
the sky is not falling

Tokaido, Carter, 40

Within this haiku, even though it's supposed to be reassuring that everything will be okay, you can feel the sense of worry and concern. Reassuring is a nice word choice because it's used when there is a sense of fear or grief of what may come. The last line of this haiku pulls the reader's attention because it's the longest line of the haiku – "The sky is not falling". That line just keeps pacing through my head because when you're told one thing, it's hard not to think about the complete opposite, and the *what ifs*.

When going into a procedure to remove cancerous cells, it is nice to hear those words though: The sky is not falling. It's nice to know that everything will be okay, and yes there will be a recovery, but everything will be fine in the grand scheme of things. This leads straight into Carter's next haiku where she discusses the simple appearance of a spider strand...

after surgery
the spider strand glistening
in rain

Tokaido, Carter, 43

I find importance in this haiku because, once again, when someone you love is so close to losing their life you begin remembering and thinking about all of the small, simple things you took for granted when you had your loved one at full health. And here Carter is finding the simple joy and beauty in a glistening spider strand. It's raining outside, which gives Carter even more reason to be down in the dumps, yet she finds

peace in this spider web. This is probably one of my favorite haiku she wrote in her novel *Tokaido* because in such a stressful time, she's at peace and finding beauty even if it is for just a split second.

Going further in depth with the idea of remembering the simple things you so easily take for granted, it's also easy to remember the big events you took for granted as well – all the words you left unsaid, all the actions you never did, and all because you were too scared or didn't want to tell your loved one yet. I find a lot of remembrance to these moments in Carter's haiku, especially later on in the journey of Carter dealing with her husband's cancer. Personally, when my mom began her surgeries and chemo treatments, I did the same thing as Carter. I replayed all the times I yelled at my mom or took her for granted. I began telling her I loved her every time I saw her and hugging her more often and just appreciating the simple moments of sitting with her and drinking coffee with her on the back porch because those were the moments that changed me and continuously change me and help me grow as a person.

wedding speech
everything
I didn't say

Tokaido, Carter, 51

A wedding speech is a moment of love and gratitude. I see this haiku as a remembrance to her past, thinking about all of the many things she didn't know how to say as a young newlywed. When you're just getting married, you have no idea what kind of hardships you're going to encounter or the amount of love you'll truly feel for this one person. This fills me with sadness because it's almost a sense of regret for not being 100% honest with her husband from the beginning. Another way I read this haiku was seeing Carter at one of her children's wedding and not being able to say the words she wished she could say because of the emotional toll of all the doctor's appointments and surgeries or just the mere fact of reliving her own wedding through her child's and knowing all the happiness her marriage once brought her is now gone. Either way, there's a huge sense of regret filled within this haiku and on top of the regret there's an underlying sadness which consumes the haiku. This haiku allows me to believe that her husband isn't doing well at all at this point in his cancer.

he touches my perfect body
with his mind

Tokaido, Carter, 56

This haiku embarks on the idea of taking what you have for granted even more, especially when it has to do with your own body and well-being. Often times, people are so influenced by social media and society and this fantasy idea of what we should look like: the perfect body. But, in the grand scheme of things a perfect body is a body that is functioning, a body that can perform everyday tasks with a beating heart and the ability to walk, stand, and move in general and it's easy to take these tasks for granted especially when you have had those abilities all your life. Carter's haiku touches on this very idea. I picture her husband lying in a hospice bed, unable to move from the lack of energy and nutrients within his ill body. When you're comforting someone who is ill or sick all you want to do is be there for them and hold them in your arms and tell them everything is going to be alright, but when going through chemo treatments or just having cancer in general your entire body aches and the last thing you want is to be touched because the pressure just makes the pain worse. This haiku illuminates the idea that even in a dark moment, her and her husband find love and validity through a glance – no words need to be said, no bodies need to be touched because the presence of their love for one another consumes the room. I find a sense of bittersweet peace within this haiku and my heart aches for the pain Carter must've been feeling in this moment.

Through any journey, whether long or short, strenuous or easy, there is always a sense of peace and resolution at the end. It's never set in stone when this peace will occur, but the destination will be found

sooner or later. When losing someone dear to your heart you know that they are never truly gone because they live on through yourself and the rest of their loved ones – through memories, stories, pictures, videos, laughter, voicemails, their work, etc. But there is always the acute awareness of their absence from your life.

never a moment
without longing
harvest moon

Tokaido, Carter, 62

I see this haiku and imagine it is now after her husband has passed. The harvest moon is an inclination towards the amount of time which this journey has transpired through. I see this point as being the yearlong marker for her trek through her husband's diagnosis, to the treatments, and surgeries, to hospice, and now his funeral. I can't even imagine losing someone you made a vow to spend the rest of your life with. I know I would consistently be longing for their presence and feel their absence in every decision and action I made. Within this haiku, I also believe Carter is longing for the harvest moon because it was a time before they knew about the diagnosis. It was a time of happiness without the worry and concern and the reality of death which consumes one's life when dealing with cancer.

late night owlspeak
love you
loveyouback

Tokaido, Carter, 70

This last haiku of Carter's broke my heart the first time I read it. At first, I read it as if she was sitting on the porch, as an action her and her husband used to do together except this time she's alone, and instead of hearing the words *love you* come out of her husband's mouth, they're just repeated by herself. I saw it as almost a consoling moment for herself – she's speaking to her husband as if he's in this great vast space in front of her, telling him one last time that she loves him, but is just repeating it to herself to remind herself of the love he had for her and the love she must have for herself through this time of grievance and loss. But, the more I keep reading it, the more interpretations I find. I know it's unfortunate, but a lot of times when going through hardships it can spread families a part, but once the hardship is over and the real pain sets in, these events have a tendency of bringing families, people, and communities even closer because in order to get over hardships people need support from others. I imagine this being a late-night conversation with one of her children, possibly her son who got the tattoo. I see them connecting again for the first time since the diagnosis because they're finally realizing that they need each other to get through this. It warms my heart when I think about this interpretation of her haiku because through something so awful came something of beauty and love.

Terry Carter is a prime example of how the art of haiku serves multiple purposes in peoples' lives. Carter was able to cope and relieve some of her anguish through the writing of haibun and recapping the experiences she felt and went through during the journey of her husband's cancer diagnosis. Through something so tragic, Carter was able to create beautiful art while also providing an outlet for readers and producing her own therapy for herself in the process. Haiku is a magical art form that works in mysterious ways for many people especially when it comes to coping grievances.

Works Cited

Carter, Terry Ann. *Tokaido*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2017.