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Take a Pause: A Look at “Stop and Start Haiku” by Glen Coats

Glen G. Coats is a modern haiku poet from New Jersey currently living in Virginia. His style is particularly interesting because in almost all of his haiku Coats provides readers with an initial image or idea then immediately shifts the focus to a different image in the following two lines. It provides readers with an avenue to interpret the second image while still leaving it relatively ambiguous.

no one home
only snow slipping
from the roof

Coats, *New Resonance* 6, 19

In this haiku, the poet gives readers an initial idea of an empty house devoid of life or movement. Coats' word choice of “no one”, instead of “nobody” for example, emphasizes the fact that there is nothing going on within this house. If he were to use another word or phrase, the reader would not have such a strong image of the empty home. Moving into line two, I appreciate Coats' use of alliteration with the phrase “snow slipping” as it causes readers to read over that line quicker than they normally would, thus, emphasizing the slip. The fact that this action takes place outside of the home is also very interesting. It further builds on the idea that the house has been dark for some time, and the only aspect of it being viewed by the world is the exterior. This haiku makes me think of holiday times when everyone in the family is bustling around worrying about their own lives. Nobody takes the time to settle down and enjoy each other's company at home, they are caught in their own interests. It especially sad because the holiday season is meant to be that time of family and fellowship. The falling snow could then symbolize the family itself slipping away from one another.

house inspection
a stranger plucks
the violin

Coats, *New Resonance* 6, 20

Here again, Coats begins the haiku with an idea then shifts the focus to a different aspect of the world. The first line does a great job of setting the scene for the rest of the haiku and allows readers to visualize the world within the poem. Then much like his other haiku, Coats uses the next two lines to describe an action scene that is somehow connected to the idea within the first line.

I find it interesting that the inspector of the home chooses to pluck the violin instead of playing it normally with a bow. While plucking is a common way to make music using a violin and is much easier than finding a bow and playing it, it still seems aggressive and awkward. The plucking sound made by a violin is much shorter and less graceful than playing the violin normally, implying that the inspection of the house is not an overly pleasant one. This is further supported by the poet's choice to describe it as a “house inspection” rather than a “home inspection”. The building being inspected is nobody's home at this point, but there is interest from a party. One can anticipate that the people attempting to buy this house are nervous about the

inspection and the process of buying a home in general. Coats does a great job in this haiku of using his word choice to create tension within the haiku without explicitly describing tension.

steady rain
the cracked cheeks
of a concrete boy

Coats, *New Resonance* 6, 20

This haiku fits perfectly into Coats' typical style of writing as it also introduces an idea in the first line then describes a different action in the next two lines. However, this haiku provides more of a break when reading the haiku in between the first and second lines. Using the word "the" with the hard 't' sound at the beginning of the line provides that increased break when reading the haiku. This fits perfectly as it builds up more natural tension in the reader as then move into reading about the more somber topic described in the final two lines. In those final lines, the use of alliteration with the 'c' sound at the beginning of three different words makes the reading of this haiku even more harsh and awkward.

The tension filled reading of the haiku feeds perfectly into the deeper interpretation of this poem. While the phrase "concrete boy" could easily be interpreted as a statue with rain pouring on it, concrete could also be a description of the boy's usual character. Boys and men are stereotypically expected to be less emotional and never to cry. "Steady rain" in this haiku could easily be interpreted as tears, as they typically stream down the face in a soft manner. This would prevent the poet from using more dramatic language to describe the rain as it would accurately describe crying. The cracks in the boy's cheek is then representative of the tear drops rolling down his face. This is noteworthy because the boy up until this point could have acted as though he did not feel such emotions, hence the term "concrete". Coats does well in this haiku to use the sounds of letters and natural breaks in reading to build tension in the readers' mind. Personally, this is one of my favorites of his haiku because of that very reason.

clouds in April
the trespasser's reluctant
"hello"

Coats, *New Resonance* 6, 21

Following the similar formula of having the separate idea in line one than the rest of the haiku, Coats does manage to alter his style slightly in this haiku. The difference being that he utilizes a one-word line to finish the haiku in line three as opposed to a phrase. This places further emphasis on that word and the connotations surrounding it. The haiku opens what I interpret as an intruder into the common idea of spring. Most think about slightly warmer weather and the beginning of new life. The ever present during the spring normally is people's least favorite part of the season. Thus, the clouds are the trespassers described in line two of the haiku.

That being said, spring rain is rarely similar to the rain in the summertime. Spring rain is much softer and sneaks up on an area. On the other hand, summer rain comes much more harshly and unapologetically. This would explain why the trespassing clouds in this haiku are reluctant to greet the world. I usually consider spring to be my favorite season because of the warming weather and the freedom generally felt

after being stuck inside all winter. However, I am never excited to see rain moving in. Coats' haiku allows me to feel the same things I do during the springtime, but on a matter that most people do not think of when they think of springtime. The haiku is written very well to allow for mixed reactions from readers through the power of words such as "trespassers" and "reluctant".

father's words
the swollen river
rises

Coats, *New Resonance* 6, 22

To me, the most interesting thing about this Coats' haiku is not the way in which he wrote it, but the implied meaning behind it. Otherwise, it perfectly fits the description of the other Coats haiku described in this essay. I find this haiku so interesting because the poet does a great job of not giving away the implied meaning of the poem. Firstly, he opens the poem by giving ne description of "father's words", they simply exist in a vacuum as neither good nor bad. This almost changes with the idea of a "swollen river", implying that some aspect of the relationship between father and child has reaches a breaking point. However, this notion is put to a halt by the word "rises" in the concluding line. The poet could have easily used a word such as "overflows" to lead readers to a negative interpretation of the interaction between father and child. Instead, Coats simply reveals that there is a level of energy built up between the two parties and it is increasing within their conversation. This leads me to thinking about the relationship I have with my own father. To me, the river symbolizes life lessons and wisdom I have gained from my father. While reading this haiku for the first time, I instantly felt a greater level of appreciation and respect towards my father. Not something a haiku often makes one feel.

the tarnished blades
of a fishing lure
summer quarrel

Coats, *New Resonance* 6, 23

In this haiku, Coats changes his typical method for writing haiku. Instead of offering a stand-alone idea in the first line of a haiku, he places that idea at the conclusion of the haiku. This shifts the focus of the poem away from the action occurring in the other two lines and places it on the solitary idea in the final line of the haiku. Normally, the opening idea acts as supplementary information to given context to the readers on how to interpret the action that follows. Here Coats reverses that idea. The greater action taking place is acting as support information for the singular idea in the haiku. As the result, there is more suspense in the idea of a "summer quarrel" than would be if the haiku was written a different way. Because, readers are already given the idea of a "tarnished blade" implying that there wrong with the relationship between the people arguing in this haiku.

This haiku makes me think of the summers following my senior year of high school and my first years in college. This is often a time where past friendships undergo massive change. New friends are made, and long-standing connections are broken down in a matter of weeks. All of this occurs as one is trying to enjoy their time off of school and work with relaxing summer activities. I enjoy that the poet included an activity such as fishing because it reinforces the idea of a summer feud interrupting the relaxation of those on their summer break. Coats' ability to shift the emphasis of the haiku by changing the order of the words is very

interesting. The haiku stays essentially the same if the last line is put at the beginning of the haiku, but it would then lose some of its emotional weight within the reader as the emphasis shifts.

midsummer
a tornado leaves
the pond dry

Coats, *New Resonance* 6, 23

This haiku reverts back to Coats classic style of having a lone image in the first line of his haiku followed by a separate idea in the next two lines. It is interesting that Coats chooses to use a singular word instead of a phrase to open his haiku. That singular noun without descriptive words attached allows readers to transport themselves into their own interpretation of what “midsummer” looks like. It may not be the perfect use of imagery, but it does better serve the overall purpose of the haiku better than a specific setting would. Moving into the remaining lines of the poem, Coats very casually, and without warning, drops a natural disaster in the middle of the haiku. Then as quickly as the poet introduced this storm, he instantly takes it away from the haiku. I find this brilliant as it perfectly captures how tornados themselves act. They can appear, seemingly out of nowhere, then disappear just as quickly while leaving massive amounts of destruction in their wake. The quick and simplistic introduction of the tornado also catches the reader of the haiku off guard. I had to reread the haiku several times in order to fully comprehend the meaning of the haiku.

The haiku then goes on to perplex me. The tornado leaves the pond “dry” rather than “empty” or some other description that describes the lack of water within the pond. Drying up a pond is not an action that can typically take place within a couple minutes, yet this is the scene Coats has left the readers. The point of all this is for to imagine their own lives in the summer being suddenly hit by some sort of disaster and being destroyed. One may thin that a disaster such as a tornado could not happen to them or that the damage could ever be that bad, yet it is still a reality, hence the idea of a dry pond in the final line of the haiku. That potential exaggeration is also meant as a warning to readers of how quickly life can change.

autumn dreams
I cannot silence
the classroom

Coats, *New Resonance* 6, 24

While this haiku still follows Coats’ basic method for writing a haiku, it is one of the haiku that uses the word “I” and bring Coats himself into his writing. He does that by simply substituting the subject of the second line with “I” without largely changing his usual style. Coats also includes very few descriptive words throughout this haiku. Apart from the word “silence” in the second line, the rest of the haiku is basic information and plot within the haiku. The information needed to better gain any meaning from the haiku is provided within the first line, further showing how Coats uses the first line of his poem to act as supplementary information to the rest of the haiku. The idea of “autumn dreams” implies that the season is finally changing from summer to fall and thus school is back in session. Despite only being there for a short part of the year, the students in the classroom are likely thinking about enjoying the seasonal activities or other school event such as homecoming or Friday night football games. As a result, these students are not likely to be intently focusing on their studies in class.

I remember this being very similar to how my high school life was. Once the school year had started and everyone settled in a little bit, the school would begin to buzz with the energy given to them by the fall season. Most people tend to enjoy many of the school event in the fall and as a result those people tend to discuss their enjoyments. However, I do sympathize with Coats who has to play the role as teacher as someone control the energy within his classroom. The second line leads me to believe that he has attempted this before but continues to be unsuccessful in his efforts. He also has a disadvantage of having to silence the “classroom” as opposed to just “students”. This implies a collective student body that he is hopelessly outmatched against. I appreciate this haiku because it also myself and other readers to revisit the feelings associated with fall time in high school but from a different perspective.

stars before dawn
over the phone
my father’s silence

Coats, *New Resonance* 6, 25

This haiku also follows Coats’ standard form of writing haiku while also using very few descriptive words attached to the nouns. I also enjoy this haiku because while it is relatively simplistic, it still manages to carry a lot of emotional weight behind it. The haiku also has a very nice rhythm to it as each line contains three words each. Giving the haiku a pleasurable aesthetic experience upon reading it.

The first line of this haiku is perhaps the most descriptive part of the entire poem. “Stars before dawn” is a very specific image at a very specific point in time. Since the stars are presented to readers prior to dawn arriving, one can interpret this as the prerequisite to a new relationship between the father and the child present in the haiku. This is interesting because the remainder of the haiku is filled with contradictory ideas. Since their conversation is happening on a phone call, one could lead to believe that there is not a strong connection between the father and child, otherwise they would be having a more intimate conversation face to face. However, that idea is challenged in the very next line by the use of the word “my”. This possessive word implies a genuine connection between the two people. It would have been just as easy for Coats to leave it at “father’s silence” and leave out the intimacy in that line and giving the haiku a new meaning. Instead, the inclusion of “my” is very intentional and adds a level of complexity to the father-child relationship. The final contradiction in this haiku comes with the inclusion of this idea of a new dawn and “father’s silence”. Typically, silence in a conversation is not a good sign as it would imply a lack of communication of the breaking of bad news. Instead, the idea of stars shining over into the new day imply that there may have been a positive epiphany on the part of the father within the haiku. Readers can see this through the star imagery in the first line. While the father-child relationship may contain large elements of darkness, which would be present at nighttime, the stars of hope were still able to shine through into a new day of greater happiness.

This is my favorite haiku of Coats’ because I love the use of contradictions within haiku that lead reader to an interpretation of the haiku. Here, I see a relationship that has not been perfect in the past, suddenly changing for the better based on some news given to the father. The present contradiction captures the greater essence of the human experience. Not every aspect of life is filled with either happiness or despair, rather it is a mixture of both that people are left to toil within.

Glen Coats utilizes images that are separate from the greater context of his haiku to give readers a deeper understanding of the meaning behind his poetry. Using an image or idea that can relate to a specific

scenario allows for reader to grasp the ideas with the haiku in a way that descriptive words cannot. As a result, the reader is allowed to put themselves within the haiku and experience what it means for themselves rather than the poet. Coats may lead to readers to a general concept or conclusion, but the door is still left open for them to picture and evaluate their own lives.

Works Cited

Coats, Glen. *New Resonance 6: Emerging Voices in English-Language Haiku*, edited by Jim Kacian, Dee Evetts, Red Moon Press, 2009, pp. 19-25.