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November 7th, 2019

Christopher Herold's Haiku of Keen Observation

One of the contemporary haiku authors that I have read this semester and found incredibly interesting is Christopher Herold. I won his book, *Inside Out*, from a recent *kukai* and I was immediately struck by his poetry. Herold writes his haiku with such simplicity, but I think his writing is beautiful. He writes his haiku in a very traditional way. Most of his haiku capture a single moment in the span of three lines. They focus on Herold's observations of people, nature, animals, and the world around him. These observations seem to come from a place of relaxation or meditation. It seems like Herold just sits, watches, and listens to the world around him. Through this method of experiencing the world, Herold is able to capture the very essence of the moment that he is observing.

Most incredibly, Herold manages to make his haiku inclusive and relatable. His observations could be my observations and many others' observations. His words are easy to understand and the images that he presents can really be experienced by anyone. I believe that Herold's imagery is one of his most powerful aspects of his haiku. He uses simple words and, somehow, manages to paint a picture in the mind of his readers. I can picture the way the cat looks, the way the breeze feels, I can hear the conversations that drift in and out with the breeze. By writing about these observations and by using simple language, Herold finds a way to fully immerse his reader in a particular moment.

I would be interested to know what kind of methods Christopher Herold uses when writing his haiku. Does he employ a similar technique to that of Cup-of-Tea in David Lanoue's *The Haiku Guy*? Does Herold "stop, look, and listen" to the world around him to get such beautiful haiku, or maybe like Mido, does he look at things from outside the picture? I'm curious to know what kind of method Christopher Herold uses to write his haiku.

While reading *Inside Out*, I came across many haiku that I loved. Some made me sad, others made me think deeply. Some made me smile, and others made me feel happy. They all allowed me to witness the same moment that Christopher Herold did when he first wrote all of these haiku. It was difficult, but I narrowed down ten of my favorite haiku from *Inside Out* that I believe show how Herold's writing comes from a place of observation and how he is able to bring the readers right along to that moment that he is witnessing.

the muddy path
followed by my dog
pursues him inside

Christopher Herold, *Inside Out*, 4

I loved this haiku for many reasons, but one of those reasons is that Christopher Herold writes this from a place of observation. It's not a very impactful moment in a life or necessarily an important moment in a life, but it is a moment that he observed and decided to write about. It is not a very exciting moment, yet I feel like I am sitting right alongside Herold watching his dog run inside. I can picture what exactly might have happened to inspire the writing of this haiku. I can picture an older man sitting at his kitchen table in the early morning light. He is reading his newspaper and sipping on a cup of coffee. It had rained the night before, so outside the open window, he can see the grass glistening with dew. It smells earthy—that smell that arises after a rain is present. He sits in total silence. He is at peace. All of a sudden, his dog comes running into the kitchen through the back door. The peace is completely broken. Now, all he is filled with is exasperation. In an instant, the older man's clean floors are covered in muddy paw prints. A vast sea of mud is now on his kitchen floor. I was not sitting with Christopher Herold as he observed his dog run in and track mud all over the floor, but his writing is incredibly relatable. I have seen my dog run inside and completely make a mess of things by tracking mud all over the house. He writes about moments that anyone can experience, which makes it easy for me to visualize what could have happened at this moment. Another

thing that I have noticed about Christopher Herold's writing is that he tells a story within the lines of his haiku. They do not use many words and they are not very long, but they are engaging. I love the way that he personifies the mud in this haiku. Not only did the dog follow the muddy path, but the muddy path followed the dog back inside. Writing his haiku like this makes his writing more interesting and it makes it easier to envision the exact moment that Herold is observing.

medicated steam
my mother's every breath
visible

Christopher Herold, *Inside Out*, 7

This haiku was another one by Herold that I really liked. To me, this haiku was incredibly emotionally jarring. When reading this haiku, I felt like the speaker was talking from a place of pain and possibly regret. Pain because he has to see his mother look so weak and unhealthy and regret because it seems like this haiku is a realization of the fleetingness of life. I think the speaker has made the realization that his mother does not have much longer to live and he is wishing that they had more time. When I read this haiku, I picture this moment taking place in a hospital room. The mother is lying in a hospital bed and she is very sick. She is hooked up to a machine that is helping her to breathe because she is too sick to be able to breathe on her own. The son sits next to his mother's hospital bed, clutching her hand as tightly as possible. He's watching his mother breathe as if he's in a hypnotized trance. *In and out. In and out.* He watches as the mask around his mother's nose and mouth fogs and clears as she breathes. This haiku just has an incredibly somber and serious tone to it. An interesting thing about this haiku, is that Christopher Herold is still just explaining an observation in a single moment that he had. It seems like this haiku was just written in a moment of silence and contemplation. Another interesting thing about this haiku is how easy Herold creates this imagery through it. I have been fortunate enough to never have had an experience like this. I've only ever seen people hooked up to machines to help them breathe in movies and television shows. But I was still able to visualize the moment that Christopher Herold is observing. Language and the way he textually creates this haiku allow me to understand what he is talking about. His language use, such as "medicated steam" and "visible," helps to solidify an image. Also, the fact that he puts "visible" on its own line stresses the importance of the word. Herold managed to take this observation and make it emotional and interesting.

apology
when a rose
isn't a rose

Christopher Herold, *Inside Out*, 13

I found this haiku incredibly interesting and I enjoyed imagining this scene. This is another haiku in which Christopher Herold is looking at the small things in life. To me, it feels like this haiku came from an observation about a fight between a couple. Roses are typically a flower that symbolizes a lot of things and can have great meaning when given to someone. A rose usually symbolizes love and affection, so it can be used as a flower of apology to someone you love or deeply care about. I think this haiku is an observation about how a rose is no longer just a flower when you give it to someone as an apology. It becomes so much more than just a rose. When reading this haiku, I pictured a young man bringing his girlfriend a bouquet of a dozen roses. She was upset with him for some reason. Maybe it was a comment that he made without thinking about it. He truly feels bad for making her upset, so he buys her the roses as an apology. But the roses aren't just roses. They represent what he wants to say. I care about you. I love you. I am so sorry. The roses symbolize his love for his girlfriend. Herold has taken a moment that is pretty common in American society and has greatly explored it. Also, the way that Herold visually sets up this haiku speaks to its observational nature. He matches up both lines about the rose, but he places the word "apology" off to the side. This makes me think like the second and third lines of the poem are Herold asking this question that he

wants to observe, and the first line of the poem is the answer to that question. When is a rose no longer a rose? When it is given as an apology.

bright morning sun
venetian blinds restripe
the tabby

Christopher Herold, *Inside Out*, 18

This is another haiku that comes from one of Christopher Herold's keen observations. Simply, he has observed the way that the morning sun comes in through the window and scatters across the tabby cat. One of the reasons that I really liked this haiku is because of the great imagery that Herold provides. I can picture exactly the moment that Herold is observing. I see the speaker of this poem sitting in a large armchair drinking coffee in the early morning. He sits next to this large window that is great for letting the sun into the room. This set of beautiful, dark wood, Venetian blinds covers the large window. The sun has still found a way into the room through the blinds. Odd stripes of sunlight are littered on the wooden floors. As the speaker sits enjoying the coffee and the early morning sun, their tabby cat slinks into the room. The cat languidly stretches out on the sun-striped floor. The sun then warms the tabby's back in odd stripes. This is a moment that I can picture easily because Herold makes the moment relatable by using really vivid words. His word choice really helps the haiku come alive in the reader's mind. His phrases like "bright morning" and "venetian blinds" and "tabby" make visualizing this haiku very easy. One can picture the brightness of the sun, the slotted blinds, and the stripes that already decorate the tabby cat. Herold's observation about this moment in time is heightened with the language that he decides to use.

elevator silence—
our eyes escape
into numbers

Christopher Herold, *Inside Out*, 28

I found this haiku to be very interesting because Christopher Herold is no longer just commenting on an observation that he's seen, but he's now commenting about human nature. I could easily visualize this moment that he observed because I have been in situations like this before. I can picture the speaker of this haiku stepping into the elevator as soon as the doors open. The elevator is slightly crowded—three or four people are already in the elevator. When the doors close, the speaker pushes the button for the floor he wants, and silence ensues. The rest of the occupants either stand still or shuffle awkwardly to deal with the silence in the elevator. To avoid the awkward silence, everyone in the elevator just slowly watches the number of the floors change. When I read this haiku, I am immediately filled with this cringe-worthy awkwardness. I can picture how everyone acts in the elevator and I can feel the awkward tension in the air. Because this haiku is about human nature, it becomes very easy to visualize and easy to understand. If you have ever been in an elevator, you have probably had an experience like this. I also think that Herold does a wonderful job setting up this haiku visually. I love the dash that he uses after the word "silence." I think the dash is a way to visually represent silence. Whether it was Herold's choice to have the silence in the pause when reading this haiku, or the dash to visually represent that nothing is there, I think it was a really unique choice that made this haiku stand out. Having silence be a part of this haiku brings it to life and it makes it easier to feel what the moment was like. Finally, I really enjoyed Christopher Herold's diction in this haiku. His use of the word "escape" really appealed to me. Escape has a bad connotation. When I hear the word "escape" I feel anxious and I feel this need to get out. Using that word made the awkwardness of the haiku easily understood. Clearly, all the speaker wants is to be off of the elevator and away from the awkward tension.

past midnight
yet another revision
of that one moment

Christopher Herold, *Inside Out*, 31

This is another of Herold's haiku that I found to be really interesting. Again, much like the previous haiku that I mentioned, this haiku is an observation about human nature. This moment that Herold is observing is something that I have had happen to me time and time again. I know other people also talk about a particular moment replaying in their mind over and over again. I think this action of revisiting a particular moment multiple times is an intrinsically human action. People are always thinking over what was said in a particular moment. They think about what they did and how it could have gone differently. This haiku is Herold observing this very human action. When I read this haiku, I picture a man lying in bed at night. In the darkness, he lies on his back just staring up at the ceiling. Earlier that day, this man had gotten into a fight with his girlfriend. They both said some regrettable things to one another. But he just keeps hearing the words that he said to her over and over in his head. He sees himself yelling at her. He sees her stomp away and slam the door on her way out of the house. He keeps asking himself why he said those things and he keeps seeing the moment go differently in his head. It's a terrible feeling. When I read this haiku, I instantly feel this sense of anxiety. The speaker keeps revising the moment because he doesn't like the final outcome. I think I can easily visualize what might have happened in this haiku because Herold is writing about an observation about human nature. Revising bad moments in one's head seem to be a universal task. I also really liked this haiku because of the way that Herold set it up visually. One line being longer than the rest gives this illusion that it goes on forever. Just like the speaker keeps repeating the moment in his head, this haiku keeps repeating.

early dusk
a flock of silhouettes
settles in the birch

Christopher Herold, *Inside Out*, 39

This haiku is, again, an example of Herold's keen observational skills. Herold has observed a flock of birds who settle on the branches of a birch tree at dusk. This is really gorgeous imagery. I can easily picture this moment. I see the speaker walking a path through a dense forest. The speaker of the poem has been out in the woods for while and now dusk is settling in. The sky turns a beautiful mix of orange, pink, and blue as the sun sets. Walking down the path, the speaker looks around at the birch trees that surrounding him. He hears the flap of wings and, suddenly, he sees the silhouettes of little birds settle down on the branches of the trees. He stops for a moment to just enjoy the sight of the birds in a birch tree. I really liked this haiku because of the use of imagery. Herold manages to paint a picture with this haiku. The words that he uses really help invoke this feeling of tranquility. His use of the words "early dusk" and "silhouettes" create this image of soft lines and blurred outlines. There is nothing harsh in the imagery—hence the feelings of serenity and tranquility that is brought about. I also really liked the way that Herold set up this haiku visually. Having "early dusk" off on its own, while the other two lines have a similar length and spacing, makes me think of a little bird perched on a branch.

frozen pond
hand in hand, a young couple
scratches the surface

Christopher Herold, *Inside Out*, 46

From wherever he is, possibly sitting at a bench near a pond or walking past it, he observes this young couple skating on the pond. I think Herold's use of imagery is my favorite part of this haiku. His word choices make it very easy to imagine what is going on in this moment. I imagine a beautiful winter day. There is snow on the ground, and it sparkles in the light of the sun. A young couple, probably teenagers, decides that they want to go ice-skating on this beautiful day. They wrap themselves up in winter coats, gloves, hats, and scarves and they make their way to this little pond that they know of. Once they get to the pond, they quickly lace up their ice skates. The boy isn't the best skater, so he slowly makes his way across the ice. The girl decides to help her boyfriend, so she takes him by the hand and they leisurely skate around the pond, leaving scratches in the ice that covers the surface. Herold's words allow me to visualize this moment that he has witnessed in a certain way. The phrase "frozen pond" lets me know that it is winter. Because of that phrase, I imagine snow on the ground and the young couple bundled up in winter apparel. The phrase "hand in hand" helps me to imagine them leisurely skating together. Finally, I really liked the phrase "scratches the surface." Herold never directly says ice-skating in his haiku. But this phrase lets me know that the couple is ice-skating.

spring morning
the art of walking beside
someone much older

Christopher Herold, *Inside Out*, 51

Here is another example of a haiku in which Christopher Herold is writing about an observation that he has had. In this haiku, he seems to be observing two different things. This first thing he is observing is the nature around him. The second thing he is observing is how he can appreciate that nature much more when he is walking next to someone who is much older than him. This is another relatable observation that Herold has made. Because it is so relatable, I can easily visualize this moment. I see a middle-aged man walking with his father. I see them walking through this beautiful forest preserve together. They walk at a much slower pace to accommodate the father, who is much older. As they walk, they listen to the birds and look at the beautiful trees. It is an incredibly serene moment. I think what I like about this haiku the most is his use of the phrase "the art of." By using this phrase Herold acknowledges that when you walk next to someone who is much older than you, something special happens. You get to see the world in a whole new way.

walking the dirt road

she in her rut, I in mine

Christopher Herold, *Inside Out*, 73

This is the final haiku that I chose from Christopher Herold's book, *Inside Out*. I really like this haiku because he writes his observation in a metaphorical way. He seems to literally be writing about two people walking down a dirt road. But if you look closer, you can see that Herold is writing about human nature again. He is writing about how self-centered human beings tend to be. Most of us stay on our own individual path and only care about our well-being and ourselves. Most people will not leave their "rut" to help other people. When I first read this haiku, I imagined his observation very literally. I saw a young man and young women walking down a dirt road. The road has been marked by the wheels of a car or tractor, and now these large ruts are in the road. Side by side, these people walk down the dirt road, each occupying a rut that has been left in the dirt. It was only after reading the haiku a couple of times that I realized Herold was speaking about the way human beings act. I also really liked this haiku because of the way it is set up visually. Having only two lines that are equally spaced apart actually looks like the mark that a wheel makes in the dirt. I thought the way the lines are spaced and written added a very interesting visual element to this haiku.

Overall, I enjoyed Christopher Herold's compilation of haiku. I thought they were beautifully written and very engaging. Almost all of Herold's haiku are written from a place of observation and contemplation. Herold keenly observes the world around him and writes beautiful haiku about his observations. I think Herold employs some very powerful tools when writing these haiku. His use of diction, imagery, and visual set-up of the lines make for very interesting and very powerful haiku.

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Works Cited

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Lanoue, David G. *Haiku Guy*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2000.