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Alaskan Haiku: Pastoral Visions

Given the degree to which the Western Haiku tradition has evolved over the years to become an exciting and innovative literary movement, it is always a joy to experience those contemporary haiku that derive their method from the older traditions. Pastoral haiku which seek to capture moments within nature or pastoral life, harkening back to the earliest days of the medium in ancient times. One place which serves as a great haven for such old-fashioned forms is the state of Alaska, a place largely undeveloped in most of its landmass. This makes the state a “a natural inspiration for haiku because of its vast and varied natural resources”, according to the Haiku Society of America (HSA). The poets of the Alaska Haiku society (Cindy Zackowitz, Billie Wilson, and Mark Arvid White) have used this naturally inspirational location to produce great works of pastoral haiku which capture the still-in-tact natural landscape of the state.

through my earmuffs—
the sound of a
spring bird

Zackowitz, THN, 10

This first example of Cindy Zackowitz’s haiku is a fantastic example of how the state of Alaska lends itself to such beautiful pastoral visions. Due to its harsh winters, the resurgence of spring in Alaska might often be accompanied by an overwhelming joy at the rebirth of nature. In this haiku, Zackowitz contrasts the cruelty of the winter season with the small ray of delight afforded by the coming of spring. The earmuffs are representative of that winter oppression, the cold forcing you to be isolated from the nature. Though, the isolation is broken by what can be assumed to be the soft singing of a bird, which signals that the winter is slowly coming to an end. The fact that the bird’s song is able to penetrate the earmuffs is a testament to the power that happiness has, only the slightest impression of the rapidly approaching spring is required to break through the cruel wintry barrier. One can imagine the smile on the author’s face as she heard the faint birdsong while out among the snow-covered trees.

whale watching—
a distant cloud rains
into the sea

Zackowitz, THN, 3

The Alaskan landscape is also accompanied by the waters of the Pacific and Arctic oceans, much of which are home to a number of whale species, making Alaska a wonderful place to observe nature not just on land, but in the sea as well. Here, Cindy Zackowitz showcases the beauty that can be found on the seas of Alaska. In this haiku, Zackowitz masterfully uses two natural symbols of great power to convey the weight of the scene’s spectacle. The whales imply not only great scale, but grace as the gentle giants of the sea. The same can be said for the rain in the distance, the sight of the large cloud showering faded streaks onto the

sea below is an imposing sight and yet rain is also peaceful despite its scale. With this, Zackowitz creates a vision which showcases not only the imposing scale of the sea's wonders but also a gentle elegance which lies beneath the surface. The hyphen is also utilized here as well as in many of Zackowitz's other haiku. In this piece it is used to great effect in projecting a pause, an implied surprise at the sight of the rain quickly pulling the viewers eye from the whales for a moment. It shows that there are simply too many natural wonders to effectively keep track of.

lamplight—
 the sound of winter rain
 soft as attic mice

Wilson, Mariposa 23

The haiku from Billie Wilson demonstrates his particular variation of the Alaskan pastoral tradition, in that his scenes usually appreciate nature in its interactions with rural life rather than nature in and of itself. In this piece he compares the sound of rain to that of mice in the attic, a rural archetype of classical tradition. The word "lamplight" also implies a more rural environment, using lamps rather than the more modern forms of lighting. Together the images of the attic and the lamp create a specific vision, and when enhanced by the use of the phrase "winter rain", a clear picture forms of a rural cabin on a late winter night, lit by lamp as the freezing rain pours outside. Wilson also utilizes the hyphen here to denote a pause in thought, the narrator of the haiku moving his attention from the lit interior of the cabin to the winter rain on the exterior. This movement of thought gives the haiku what could be called an expanding scope, beginning at the more intimate scale huddled in the warm lamplight before expanding to the less comfortable rain outside. Though, much like Zackowitz's whales, the winter rain here is given a softer edge being compared to the sound of mice. Despite its harsh nature, the rain has a gentle element of beauty.

autumn chill
 faint chimes
 from our oldest clock

Wilson, FT/TL, 2

Once again we have an example of Wilson using rural imagery and its interactions with nature to create a unique pastoral atmosphere. There is also a recurrence of the seasonal imagery that appears in many of the Alaskan haiku, using the changing of the seasons as a demonstration of the beauty of nature. In this piece Wilson utilizes the sensory image of the "autumn chill" to create a nostalgic atmosphere. The word "chill" implies only the subtle bite of cold that comes with the Autumn season, something most people will remember from their childhoods playing outside during the early holiday season. The use of Autumn builds the vision for the reader: images of an almost Alaskan forest, orange leaves strewn about the ground while a light fog obscures the distance. In this environment, Wilson places the image of the clock chime. Not only a symbol for the passage of time, but a soothing rhythmic sound which adds to the nostalgic atmosphere. Finishing with the detail of the clock being their "oldest", Wilson constructs a complete vision of rural nostalgia. A vision of watching the seasons change as a symbol of the past and those we have lost chimes on behind.

lingering grief
 the pale morning light
 stirs birdsong

Wilson, Frogpond, 33

Here is another example of Wilson's slight touch that adds an element of story to the captured moment of a haiku. In another context, its possible the image of the pale morning and birdsong may be perceived in a positive light, however when colored by the mood of the first line these symbols take on a darker connotation. The word lingering is interesting diction, as it gives the impression that the grief is a remnant of an event that occurred some time ago. In this context, the morning light's depiction as "pale" would seem accurate, as to someone experiencing a lingering grief due to loss the world would seem muted and lacking vibrance. There is an impression that due to the lingering grief the morning and its birdsong have become a melancholy routine, a recurring reminder of another day to be spent without whomever the narrator has lost which causes him such grief. This haiku represents a sort of inversion of the ideals of the pastoral vision, where despite its beauty nature fails to heal the broken heart. Despite its light the morning is pale, though it does because he birds to start singing. Perhaps the image of the birdsong represents a small glimmer of hope, a symbol of the morning far less marred by the grief of loss. In this piece is a grief so strong that its lingering causes nature itself to become dull and pale. One wonders what the narrator lost to induce such a malaise. That, however, is the beauty of Wilson's small touches of story to his poems.

winter wind--
 a cradlesong sung
 in an ancient tongue

Wilson, THN, 1

For this piece, Wilson won Readers' Choice Poem of the Year, and it is easy to see why. What this piece lacks in Wilson's rural touches it makes up for in its pure evocative sense of imagery. Characterizing the winter wind as a song is evocative enough, but the use of the term cradlesong implies the lifetime spent in Alaska, among its harsh winters and natural landscape. The double hyphen is an interesting choice, perhaps hinting at a moment of deep reflection on the phenomenon of the wind. The portrayal of the winter wind – itself a symbol of the stark and imposing forces of nature – as a lullaby is yet another example of the pastoral vision stemming from this interplay between the imposing and gentle elements of nature. What truly makes the haiku is the third line, affording the piece an unmatched sense of scale. This lullaby of the wind is ancient, sung in a language so old we cannot understand it anymore. It evokes the images of the many generations before, raised to the lullaby of the harsh winter wind. The haiku creates a vision of a community, or culture, forged one child at a time. Each child sleeping with the gentle lullaby of the winter wind, a force of nature that unites a family through its persistence in their lives. One could imagine a cabin in the Alaskan wilderness, battered by the freezing winds as a baby sleeps inside. While it sleeps the sound of the wind gives it dreams of those who built the cabin, and those before them, and those before them, and so on. It portrays this almost spirit-like presence of nature and the effect it has on those that live among it and their descendants. It is certainly deserving of its accolades.

in a stalled car
 at the forest's edge
 the silence

White, Haiku Quarterly

Mark White is the regional coordinator of the Alaska Haiku society, and his style differs slightly from his contemporaries in the AHS. From his own words, he first became enamored with haiku after “reading a slight poem about a cat in a sunbeam”, after which he became enamored with the simplicity of the captured image (AHS). Perhaps as a result of this, White’s haiku tend to focus more on quiet, singular moments. One could characterize the captured moments of his haiku as silent moments. This piece is a perfect example, as the moment it captures is heavily reliant on silence. Having worked as a night driver for two years, I feel a connection the feeling White is trying to convey with this haiku. That chilling isolation and silence that comes with sitting in a car alone at night, the strange instinct that maybe nothing exists outside of the car and that you are all that’s left. Though in this poem, White constructs a scene of anxiety, as sitting right on the forest’s edge mean any forest creature may become alerted to your presence. The stalled car is an interesting symbol as well: in the face of the imposing nature symbol of the forest, man made technology fails. While adding to the anxious atmosphere, this interplay also affirms the pastoral ideals of the triumph of nature over technology. Recurring again is the theme of nature’s imposing elements being contrasted with the gentler ones. The anxious notion of the car stalled at the edge of the dark forest is put against “the silence”, canted slightly on the line. This pause, silent and peaceful, is a wonderful captured moment.

walking home late
 I stop, shivering ...
 northern lights

White, NCA

Following White’s theme of silent, “captured moments”, this piece is a marvel of atmosphere and mood. While a genuinely simple sentiment, the story of this haiku is told masterfully. White breaks convention slightly again here, this time using ellipses. The pause implied by the ellipses is much longer, more thoughtful than those brought on by a hyphen. The ellipses provides a moment of deep introspection, in awe of the natural wonder occurring before the narrator’s eyes. Much like the previous haiku, this piece embodies the pastoral spirit through its use of nature as both an imposing symbol and one of awe. Though in my opinion what sets this poem apart from the others is that the vision of the northern lights is portrayed here as an utterly breathtaking and positive experience. There is no foreboding, no anxiety, no sense of melancholy. While the northern lights may be considered imposing due to their size, their most defining trait is their visual beauty, making them a perfect analogue for the inspiration spirit of nature.

Much like Wilson, White adds small touches of story to add scale and emotion to this captured moment. The first two lines add context to the sight of the lights, creating a small narrative. Walking home late, in Alaska and enduring the freezing cold is not a positive experience. One can imagine that for most of his walk the narrator was miserable, hating every second. But then, he stops. Just for a moment, the narrator experiences the true wonder of nature, likely uplifting his mood greatly. This scenario, I think, perfectly encapsulates the spirit of pastoralism as it relates to Alaska. That there is raw, fantastical beauty to be found in nature, only if one is willing to endure its hardships. Then, there is something there that can change your life, if only for a moment.

Alaska has always been unique, as a state. It has an odd history and location, but if there is one thing that lingers in the mind about Alaska it’s the landscape. The state has a visually stunning natural environment, even in the regions usually plagued by indomitably cold weather. These poets, as part of the Alaska Haiku

Society, have translated the unique setting of the state into the art form of haiku through small and intimate captured moments. Each haiku represents a slice of the Alaskan wilderness, embodying the pastoral spirit of the land largely devoid of human interference. There, one can experience nature in its rawest extent, and through this the Alaska Haiku Society have created great art. Each of them conveying Alaska's beauty in a series of pastoral visions.

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