

**Marlene Mountain: A Rebel *with* a Cause**

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April 14, 2022

Upon my first introduction to Marlene Mountain's work, I was struck with how very *different* her haiku were in comparison to other authors. I had never seen or read anything like them! She possessed the unique talent of arranging her haiku in visual embodiments of the things her haiku described. Mountain entitled this genre of haiku "unaloud haiku" or "eye-ku"; very clever titles for a very clever concept. I felt it would only be appropriate to provide the first haiku of hers I was exposed to as an example of "unaloud haiku":

o g  
r  
f frog

Marlene Mountain, *the old tin roof*, 132

Here, Mountain is able to supply the reader with a basic idea that invokes an infinite number of interpretations. My own was that the initial "frog" was the sound of the frog croaking, and that the second was the acknowledgement that the sound was, in fact, a frog. However, I have also heard the interpretation that the initial "frog" was the frog leaping, and the second was the frog landing, perhaps on a lily pad. Though this haiku is simple, -it technically only has one word; repeated- it creates a myriad of possibilities, and paints a vivid picture for those reading it. The reader can begin to imagine the world around the frog. For example, I began to picture where it jumped to, where the author was walking, if they were even walking at all, what time of day it was, and what body of water the frog was leaping into or out of. This haiku is beautiful in its simplicity, yet it creates a complex scene for the reader to enjoy.

Another great example of her eye-ku is:

v i  
o  
l t  
e

Marlene Mountain, *the old tin roof*, 35

In this haiku, Mountain recreates the shape of the flower itself. Each letter represents each delicate petal. I find it interesting that once you remove one letter, the picture is incomplete. The same can be said of the flower. Once the petals begin to fall, the flower looks less and less like a flower. I also love that the “o” was placed in the middle, as it solidifies the circular shape of the flower, and the pistil that hold the whole thing together. This haiku and the former both illustrate (no pun intended) the magic of her unaloud haiku.

Upon further research into Marlene Mountain’s life, I discovered that she was a graduate of the University of Oklahoma (Norman) with a BFA in Painting in 1962. Following this, she went on to earn an MA in Painting with a Minor in Literature from the University of North Dakota. From this, it is clear that she had an incredibly strong foundation in the visual arts. One could even go as far as to say that it was one her key manners of expressing her inner life. This foundation combined with the minor in literature she received at graduate school, explains the incredible connection she was able to begin making with the visual arts and words. She was able to provide the world with a fresh perspective through her own personal training and interests. Additionally, it is important to note that she was a young adult in a very turbulent time in American history. She was enrolled in college at the time of the Vietnam War, which divided the country in ways that had scarce been seen before. This event triggered a wave of revolutionary thinking, spearheaded by the youth in America. This included Marlene Mountain. Her haiku explore several political, feminist, and environmentalist themes. Mountain expressed that humans had corrupted the world, especially nature, and that we were unable to live as we once had.

This desire to appreciate and restore nature to its former glory, was not an altogether unpopular notion. In fact, several other authors that lived through the war covered the subject as well. However, Mountain’s haiku still stood out as unique. Take, for example, the following two haiku:

gosling following its neck to the bug

frosty morning  
migrating geese  
and refugees

Marlene Mountain, *the old tin roof*, 57

Ernest Berry, *Forgotten War*, 38

In both haiku, the author is examining some version of geese. In Mountain’s, it is just a baby goose, and there is clearly only one being focused on. In Berry’s, there is an entire flock of geese! Additionally, each haiku discusses the importance of appreciating and preserving nature. However, the similarities end there.

In Mountain’s haiku, there seems to be somewhat of a hopeful undertone. Life starts anew with the gosling just learning how to make its way in the world. It is living in nature as it should be, away from a great number of humans. It also provides the reader with a bit of a funny visual, as the gosling is twisting around itself just to reach a puny bug. It almost reminds me of a dog chasing its own tail. This could be a commentary on humans observing

nature. We are the ones who decide that animals doing certain things looks funny. We are the reason dogs are domesticated and perform tricks. With no human there, the gosling would still do the same thing, but it would be completely normal behavior. It is only comical because humans deem it so. The key takeaway I have picked up on, is that nature should behave as it pleases, not the way humans deem acceptable. However, what makes this haiku stand out is the way it is written. It is a one-line haiku, which makes it a bit more difficult to decipher where the break of the haiku falls. When the reader begins to play around with where the break falls, the haiku becomes even more interesting. This is part of the genius of Mountain. She leaves so much up to the reader with her formatting. For example, if you were to place the break after following, this becomes a completely different haiku. What is the gosling following? Is it *actually* the gosling's neck down to the bug? If not, what's neck is by the bug? What if the bug is not actually insect, but a disease of some sort? The possibilities are endless.

In contrast, Berry's haiku relates nature directly to the influences of war. It is less subtle in its message. Because of the war, nature is affected. It also compares humans to the animals migrating, making them out to be similar. The geese and refugees are not assured that they will be able to complete their journey safely. Bullets rip through the air, bombs go off, and humans are forced to interfere with the inner workings of nature. War brings so many uncertainties and dangers along with it, and it truly is a living hell. The interesting thing is that war was something created by humans. Humans changed the earth in irreparable ways; quite literally disrupting the frosty morning with complete and utter violence. This disruption of nature is similar to the phenomenon Mountain describes, but its execution is completely different. Berry utilizes the more traditional format for haiku, and leaves little to the imagination in terms of the break of the haiku. It seems pretty straightforward in comparison to Mountain's haiku.

However, as stated above Mountain does share the same passion for peace and nature as other authors. They have a keen sense of activism similar that each person shares. Mountain's activism mainly covered environmentalism, feminism, and anti-war messages. In true Marlene Mountain fashion, her haiku that covered these topics are unique and eye-catching. They are visually intriguing and leave the reader questioning their meaning. This is why they are so successful in their activism. Here are some examples of her activism through haiku:



Marlene Mountain, *nature talks back, tear out*

In this haiku, Mountain highlights the disastrous effects of deforestation. Over time, humans have destroyed rainforests, and will continue to do so until they become utterly unrecognizable. The haiku demonstrates this process by removing letters until the word “afet” is left over. This word, like the rainforests, is unrecognizable, and strange. It also sounds like “eff it”, which could symbolize humans’ relationship with nature. We don’t care enough to save it, and that is why we are doomed to destroy it. Nothing will be left. She also rejects the traditional structure of haiku. It seems to go on endlessly, which mimics what is actually going on in the world currently.

As I mentioned above, she was also a devoted feminist, and wrote several series of haiku and poems surrounding women’s rights in her lifetime. One example could be found on her website:

thousands of women gather and talk in spite of language  
all know who the man is

Marlene Mountain, *pissed off poems and cross words*, number 5

I appreciate that this haiku points out the power women can hold when they band together. Patriarchy has a history of pitting women against each other, and relishing in each bout of jealousy, each “cat fight”, each judgement. When women get the opportunity to get to know one another, they realize that men are the ones keeping them from supporting one another. By banding together, they “stick it to the man”, and reject all the behavior society deemed acceptable. I love the power and passion Mountain pours into this haiku, and all of her other activist haiku.

Aside from this activism, Mountain seems to have had a very rebellious spirit in general. However, this sense of rebellion does not seem to come from a spiteful place. It stems from the truth. Mountain was naturally disposed to view the world in a different way than other people. So, her work cannot be considered malicious or be viewed as purposefully *trying* to appear avant-garde. Much like the very nature of haiku themselves, Mountain’s work simply *is* what it is. It exists in the moment. That moment just happens to be very different from other author’s moments. Mountain also has a certain sense of playfulness -verging on mischief- that is really refreshing. I think that this playfulness is what helps her “get away with” covering difficult topics in a serious, yet still amusing manner. She is saying what needs to be said but is not overly preachy. She keeps her readers engaged to this day. I also find that her desire for a better, freer world encourages other people to hope for the same. She shoves a mirror in her reader’s faces, confronting them with the truth, and pushing them to want more. She echoes this longing for freedom in one of her haiku:

Haiku doesn’t have rules people have rules

-Marlene Mountain

Much like several of her other haiku, Mountain rejects the structure that most authors utilize in their haiku. She actively goes against the rules she is talking about in this haiku. She is also able to point out that humans have the tendency to cast too much judgement on various art forms instead of appreciating them for what they are. Instead of just living in the moment, we judge whether or not that moment is good enough. I appreciate that she writes whatever comes up in her. She goes through drafts and shapes her haiku into their full forms but does not cast judgement on the previous drafts. They are all part of the process.

She takes this freedom even further in some of her other haiku, experimenting with the many different ways a word can be spelled and mixed up. One example can be found on her website:

**haicoup highku high kucoup hai coup hai kuhigh**

**Raw Nervz Haiku 3:4 1996-97**

Marlene Mountain, high coup hai ku writings

Here, Mountain makes a play on the very word “haiku”. She stages a “coup” on the word, takes over, and turns it into something she likes better or finds amusing. In the end, she ends up with the opposite of the word. “kuhai” or “kuhigh” is the reverse of the word haiku. I believe with this; she shows that authors can really challenge themselves to be more experimental with their work. They can let go of the rules people are taught to follow when first learning about haiku and create their own manner of writing.

Marlene Mountain served as an incredible innovator in the haiku community. Her activism, playful spirit, and complete restructuring of haiku as an art form have earned her several accolades. Most notably, she was appointed as the honorary curator of the American Haiku Archives at the California State Library in Sacramento from 2014-2015. Unfortunately, she passed away in 2018, but her haiku and innovations to the art form will live on forever. On a personal level, Mountain inspires me to become more experimental with my work. I don't have to adhere to any set of rules in particular, and that makes writing so much more fun! I have come to view writing haiku as an exploration of self, and a means of expressing my inner life. Freeing myself from restrictions and rules makes it much easier to find the things I need to express. I have Marlene Mountain to thank for that.

## Works Cited

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the old tin roof- Marlene Mountain

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Forgotten War- Ernest Berry