

Global Haiku Spring 2022  
Reader Response Essay

Taking Up Space: Marlene Mountain's Reverence and Anger

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With a name like Marlene Mountain, this haiku author was destined to be a powerful writer. Mountain made a splash in the haiku world by being different and pushing the boundaries of an art form that was already known for its experimentation. While Mountain was no doubt aware of the technical “rules” at play in most haiku, she allowed herself to break these rules and instead write haiku that are strong, strange, and wonderful. From this mindset, Mountain's haiku have a reverent quality to them as she captures mundane experiences and reminds the reader of the power in these simple moments. Mountain's devotion to nature, her need to capture specific and fleeting moments, her political activism, her use of visual elements to convey a larger point—these characteristics set Mountain apart from other writers and make her strange adopted surname a common one in the haiku world.

on this cold  
    spring 1  
2 night 3 4  
    kittens  
    wet  
    5

Mountain, *The Haiku Anthology*, 131

One reason why I was so drawn to Mountain's writing is her use of visuals to deepen the meaning and imagery of her haiku. (That being said, please forgive me for formatting errors that I may commit in transferring her haiku into my paper!) A lot of haiku authors utilize tabs, ellipses, and other interesting line breaks to emphasize certain words and enhance the experience of their haiku. But Mountain is one of the only authors I've seen who plays so boldly with the formatting—and it pays off. Noting the shape of this haiku and the intentional way in which Mountain has spaced out the numbers, we use these clues to interpret the meaning of the words. I believe that Mountain is documenting the birth of five kittens, but I only get this because of her use of spacing and numbers. If she had used a traditional format and only words, I might think that the kittens are simply in the rain, or that dew is rising in the night. But the numbers, plus the way they are spaced out in the haiku, imply birth. The speaker is watching this birth and counting to see how many kittens there are. It is an extremely clever use of space, and it adds layers to the haiku. I can feel the cold spring air, and something about this heightens the miracle of the kittens' birth: a beginning. The two lines before the final “5” have me holding my breath, waiting to see—are we done? Is the mother okay? Are there more? Is this last kitten going to survive? The final line, the simple number, marks an exhale, a reassurance that the full litter has been born and now there will be rest. Mountain's commitment to documenting a powerful moment and helping her readers to feel the reverence that she does is admirable, and it makes for a wonderful haiku.

together as we dry there is the listening to rain

Mountain, *Global Haiku*

As well-known as Mountain is for the interesting formatting of her haiku, she has also made a name for herself with one-line haiku. These haiku eliminate the breaths that are inherent in three-line haiku, and they push the reader to decide what words are significant and to make their own meaning out of the haiku. There is little guidance from the author. This haiku once again speaks to Mountain's reverence for simple, miraculous moments. The speaker is with someone else, and they have found shelter from the rain. But the rain is not an enemy or something to resent; instead, they listen to the patter of raindrops and let themselves connect to this experience of nature. A lot of Mountain's haiku engage with nature in this way, pulling out relatively common moments—how many of us have listened to rainfall?—and imbuing them with significance, or rather, pointing out the significance that is inherent in these experiences. In our busy day-to-day lives, it is easy to ignore or even just not notice the power of the world around us. But Mountain's haiku are determined to demonstrate how these things that we take for granted are moving and worth appreciating. By condensing this haiku into one line, Mountain encourages us to read it in one breath, adding pauses wherever we feel they are needed, or not at all. It feels simpler than it is, but maybe that is Mountain's point. There is power in nature, in quiet moments, in listening to the world around us. This haiku invites us to feel that power in the same reverent way that Mountain does.

"more safe"

more safe places for american cats & dogs than for her & kids

murder defendant's interest in law

ca: if she were an unwed father she'd have equal rights

is he a dish or a washer

'non-chemically enhanced tree' for 'sexhist hollowday'

here a piece there a piece greenpieces

yet another hot line number in america 1-800-701-bomb

partial rating of the hbo movie mild violence

major feminist scratching tv commercial reversal not senryu

nature is as nature does

& then the male god did what where's the afterbirth

sacred is nothing

Mountain, "more safe," *Marlene Mountain*

This haiku sequence, titled "more safe," is a fascinating example of Mountain's one-line haiku sequences. Each of these lines could stand alone as one-line haiku and they would still be meaningful and fascinating. But taken together, these ideas combine to convey a compelling message. Besides her nature haiku and interesting formatting, I admire Mountain for her political activism, her determination to show bad realities,

and her willingness to be angry. It takes a lot to be angry! But Mountain allows herself to be downright pissed off, and her fast-paced list of things that are wrong in our world helps us recognize and understand that anger. Mountain's feminism shines through in his piece, particularly in the first line "more safe places for american cats & dogs than for her & kids." The implication—that Americans are more compelled to help animals than to see and alleviate the suffering of human beings—is horrifying. The image it evokes is of a mother trying her best to take care of her kids when the world is against her. She has no safe place to go or hide, unlike cats and dogs who can take shelter anywhere and usually find a human to help them. We can also choose to interpret it as not a mother and child relationship, but the relationship of shared helplessness between women and children in a world that prioritizes men. This haiku compares the women and children to animals, acting on instinct, living in survival mode. But Americans are so numb to this, so disinterested in terrible suffering, and Mountain calls it out. This is not her only dig against American culture. The line "yet another hot line number in america 1-800-701-bomb" highlights how resigned we are to acts of violence and how we have numbed ourselves to them. We are so accustomed and accepting of violence as just a fact of life, to the point that a bombing—by all accounts a terrifying act of violence—can be distilled into a hotline number, as if the existence of a hotline should be enough to reassure us and provide security. It is so corporate, so unfeeling, so unnatural. This piece stands in direct contrast to Mountain's nature haiku, which encourage readers to feel everything. It is easy to see how someone like Mountain, who feels such reverence for life, would be frustrated by our culture's apathy, and I can't blame her. In fact, I respect her for speaking to this and calling us out on our numbness. Not only does it dull our individual lives, but it allows us to look away from atrocity, and that can't be how we live.

"no"  
'no innocent babies are going to die in that clinic today' \*  
worst book in the world's best seller

\* paul hill

Mountain, "no," *Marlene Mountain*

If we needed more proof that Mountain's political activism serves to make her both a better writer and a better person, here it is. Mountain is an unapologetic feminist. Her push for women's rights is beyond admirable. Unfortunately, this haiku, titled "no," is as relevant today as it was when she wrote it. As more and more politicians sign legislation that limits access to safe abortion, the fight to protect *Roe v. Wade* needs to be raging strong. To make her point clear, Mountain uses a quote that echoes many anti-abortion activists, but there is a disturbing history behind this specific quote. Paul Hill said a variation of this sentence during his arrest in 1994 after he shot an abortion provider and his bodyguard. Hill believed that it was his duty to prevent abortions by murdering abortion providers, and he encouraged other people to follow in his footsteps after his arrest and eventual execution in 2003. Mountain uses the asterisk and Hill's name to provide this context. It is a stark reminder of extremist violence and how dangerously passionate people are about the topic of abortion. As Mountain notes, this—the violence, the restrictions on women, the prioritization of political views and fetuses over human life—is the "worst book," one of the worst things about the world. We should also take a moment to appreciate the title of the haiku, "no." While this could mean many things, it makes me think about the concept of consent and how the topics of rape and incest play into debates about abortion. In these scenarios, the "no" is ignored, just like the people who need abortion are often ignored because we give more focus to political and religious ideas than to the human beings who are affected by these decisions. As politicians push for anti-abortion legislation and we wait to

see what will happen in the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* court case that is currently before the Supreme Court, this haiku seems as relevant as ever—and as chilling.

alone—  
the taste of summer water  
from the faucet

Mountain, *The Living Haiku Anthology*

On a lighter note, this haiku made me smile. Once again, Mountain does a great job of taking a simple moment and showing how wonderful it can be. She uses physical sensations to convey meaning in this haiku. By specifying that this is “summer water,” Mountain encourages us to connect to the season. We infer that it is warm and pleasant, and the water is made to seem all the more refreshing because of these tactile inferences. The detail that this water comes straight “from the faucet” makes me think of hot days and drinking water from the garden hose, which always tastes just a little different from water in a glass or from the tap. It feels more physical, in a way; there is an emphasized connection to the body, the outdoors, and nature. With all of these feelings and sensations in mind, the first line of the haiku takes on a different quality. The “alone” does not feel lonely. Instead, it seems almost luxurious. The speaker has a moment to themselves, and they are enjoying it by indulging in this experience and allowing themselves to really feel all of the sensations and emotions around them. The em dash and line break seems to emphasize this; it makes me think of someone checking one last time to make sure they are truly alone, then indulging and sticking their head under the faucet to get a drink. It’s an extremely human moment, and it’s one of those that only really exists when we are alone and let ourselves relax and be who we are: human. The simple descriptions in this haiku capture so much, and we are left again with the reverence and fascination that Mountain holds for these seemingly insignificant moments. When we see them through her eyes like this, they seem almost magical.

rain  
dr p  
o

Mountain, “raindrop,” *Marlene Mountain*

My first introduction to Mountain came from her haiku with interesting visual elements. This haiku is fascinating, not because it is so simple, but because that simplicity is deceiving. By playing with the space of the haiku, Mountain provides an interesting visual to go along with her writing. The “o” falls from the word like a raindrop; the implication is pretty obvious. But it’s fascinating to see how Mountain uses this space to make meaning. Anyone can describe the sight and feeling of rainfall, but only Mountain thinks to illustrate it in this way. Ultimately, this is why I was so drawn to her work in the first place. I never think to structure my work differently or play with the space around my writing. Seeing the ways in which Mountain does this so naturally makes me wonder how her mind works and how I can take the lessons of studying her haiku and apply it to my own work. I’m curious about following her example in my haiku, but as I prepare to graduate and establish my identity as a writer outside of being a student, I also think about how I can take these lessons and incorporate them in other work. Multimodality, unconventional storytelling methods, illustrations—I want to experiment with all of these things in my own work. Mountain exudes fearlessness, and her work is unapologetic and not afraid to take up space. This is what I want to gain from her.

attn: male deities and agents thereof a woman's body is her own  
 not polluted fallen sinful unclean shameful not property  
 bug off god

Mountain, "rain a nature sequence," *Marlene Mountain*

This is just one part of a longer haiku sequence, titled "rain a nature sequence," but I wanted to pull it out from the sequence and study it because it's awesome. I found this sequence on Mountain's website under the tab "pissed off poems and crosswords," and I think that accurately describes the mood of this haiku. I've already talked about Mountain's feminism and political activism, but once again, I'm struck by her courage. Mountain directly challenges religion, specifically Christianity. She doesn't care if she alienates her audience; she has something to say, and she is going to say it. But ultimately, this haiku isn't about challenging religion, but rather fighting against the patriarchal idea that women's bodies are gross and that men are entitled to them. She says right away that "a woman's body is her own," which is already a powerful statement in a society where a woman's control over her body is so often taken away from her. Our culture treats female bodies like they are just objects rather than homes for human beings, and as a result, a lot of women end up feeling very disconnected from their bodies and their lived experiences. We have little ownership over our own bodies, both politically and in day-to-day life; of course they don't feel like ours. But Mountain takes this a step further, and she also attacks the idea that female bodies and experiences are dirty. The shame around menstruation, the disgust for body hair, the very specific types of female bodies that are allowed to exist—all of these cultural ideas contribute to a society that views female bodies as "polluted fallen sinful unclean shameful." It's a strange paradox; our culture seems to feel both attracted/entitled to and repulsed by female bodies. Mountain calls out both of these ideas. On a technical level, this haiku also intrigues me because the lines are long and mostly lack punctuation, which is a deliberate move on Mountain's part. For example, by refusing to punctuate the second line, Mountain makes the list of negative adjectives feel overwhelming and unending. This is the exact feeling that women get as they try to interpret the cultural messages that tell them how to exist in their bodies. Every word and space that Mountain writes is intentional, and the result is always fascinating.

Mountain originally grabbed my attention because of the interesting visuals and use of spacing in her haiku. But as I studied her work and read about her life, I realized that Mountain's real writing power comes from the emotion she puts behind every haiku. Her obvious reverence for the world around her is contagious, and she captures it in haiku that seem to freeze moments in time. Her work reminds readers of experiences they always overlooked in the past but never will again, and her deep appreciation for these simple moments makes her haiku stick with you long after you've finished them. Equally astonishing is Mountain's political activism that she conveys through her art, and these angry, powerful haiku are wonderful reminders of all the things worth fighting for. I have loved reading Mountain's work and seeing her attributes, including her willingness to experiment and her need to speak up for what's right. But above all else, I admire Mountain for daring to take up space.

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