

Contemporary Reader Response Essay
Global Haiku Traditions, Millikin University
November 8, 2018

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Bob Boldman and Haiku of Simplicity

I first experienced the writings of Bob Boldman in Cor Van Den Heuvel's *The Haiku Anthology*, and I was immediately captured by how different his haiku were from all of the other authors in this collection. Many of his haiku are only one line, or are broken up in an unorthodox way, or contain only a few words. These techniques left a mystifying effect on me. How could so few words or phrases encapsulate so much?

Bob Boldman himself is quite mystifying as well. When trying to research him to find his haiku philosophy and how it came to be, I found nothing. I couldn't even find any basic background information about his education or hometown. The only success I found was in the back of his publication called *Everything I Touch*, in which he has this to say about himself and his work:

"i am not good at talking about myself. i used to be. haiku is using words to express wordlessness. it's using time to express the timelessness. there is no art like it, so each moment is as self-erasing as a dream—an open-ended, wild-eyed dream. so when you read it, each time (or timeless time) you read it, it's like waking up...we are drifting clouds, rising surf. no seer or seen, just sightseeing without a seer."

Even this description itself is mystery. Bob Boldman is definitely not one to fit in an easily understood box, even if his haiku do appeal to many readers across the world. One of my favorite parts of Bob Boldman's work is that the structural simplicity leaves a lot of the interpretation or filling in the blanks to the readers and their own imagination. In some of his examples below, I will highlight where Boldman's haiku take my brain, and explore other possible interpretations to show the ambiguity and mysticism of his style. While some may think this method of creating haiku is counterproductive, but I hope to prove that this new approach is both refreshing and intelligent. I think John Stevenson puts it best in his review of *Everything I Touch*:

"If anyone still doubts that the minimalist haiku can offer deep resonance and emotional complexity, Bob Boldman's *everything I touch* should settle the question. This work is perfectly tuned and reflects years of diligent attention to the craft of wrapping a few words in layer upon layer of associations. I envy those of you who are encountering his poetry for the first time. You're in for a treat."

Ultimately, I aim to explore Bob Boldman's simplicity, or 'minimalism,' as Stevenson would call it, and discover why this method is so effective. My first example was the first haiku I ever read by Boldman, and I think is the perfect example of how a haiku less than 10 words (this one only containing 5) can create an image or feeling almost too complex to be described.

in the temple
a
heartbeat

Bob Boldman, *Walking with the River*

Most haiku start their first line off by giving us the setting. In that respect, Bob Boldman follows the rule. However, after the first line he strays from the norm by giving the next two lines one word each. The way he structures these words, one on top of the other, brief and separate, makes the text sound like a heartbeat

when read aloud. Within itself, the use of the heartbeat gives this haiku an awareness of human life. This simple subject is free to be interpreted in many ways. The first image that popped into my head while reading this haiku was a person kneeling in an empty sanctuary, with all of the stained glass windows and the statues of religious figures, to pray. I imagine this person to be exasperated or desperate, feeling alone and beaten down. But amongst the still peace and quiet in this temple, they are able to hear the sound of their own heartbeat and are reminded that they are human: still alive and present even amongst struggles. They also realize that there is something greater looking down, and this brings them peace.

This is just one interpretation of a haiku that can have great meaning in a variety of contexts. But one thing is for sure, Boldman is able to create a powerful image in the minds of his readers by meticulously simple word choice and placement. Another haiku that could be easily matched to the last one can be found below. While the subject matter is similar, Boldman takes a different approach in relation to attitude and structure here:

temple bells untying the knot of mind

Bob Boldman, *Drizzle of Stars*

The first thing that strikes me about this haiku is the use of the phrase “temple bells,” instead of church or chapel bells, which seem to be more common in our vocabulary. I think Boldman knows that his audience expands beyond people like him or the people he lives around. He understands that people have different religious practices and holy places, and so he chooses the term that he feels will appeal to the highest amount of people, while still getting the same point across. In this way, he quickly makes this haiku exponentially more universal and accessible. It’s also important to note that this haiku is all in one line, as opposed to the last one which was in the traditional 3-line format. By doing this, Boldman equates the sound of the bells with the “untying the knot mind,” and the sense of contentment that follows that.

As far as the content of the haiku, I like to compare this to his “heartbeat” haiku, as they have the same setting and sense of peace present. The image that comes to my mind in this haiku is one similar to my home church. My family normally comes in late to choir practice and generally frazzled and fatigued. Before the service starts, I talk with the people of the congregation already there about how my life is going, which isn’t anywhere close to perfect. And then, as the church bells ring, I sit back in the pew awaiting the beginning of the service, and as the prelude plays, I let go of my frazzled mindset and all of the everyday problems in my life. This is when the peace sets in, and for a while, you can find an escape. In seven words, Boldman was able to create an entire scene and emotional journey.

The next haiku also only uses seven words to capture a wide range of emotions. Rather than this being a religious or spiritual piece, this haiku explores internal and external perspective:

mirror my face where I left it

Bob Boldman, *Everything i Touch*

The way that Boldman structures this haiku gives it a clear voice. It sounds as though the speaker is taking breaks in a hesitant sort of way, with an attitude of self-doubt, or perhaps even amazement. When I read this haiku, I imagine the speaker deeply analyzing their own face in the reflection, attempting to get an idea of what they really look like or who they are. It’s important to note that the speaker only has one perspective of themselves within this haiku, but something about this fact doesn’t seem to be enough. With each new glance, the speaker tries to find something new they couldn’t find before, but in reality, they will never get to view themselves as they are seen by others and the rest of the world. The best they can get is a guess from this mirror. This leaves the reader with an endless cycle not getting the fulfillment they want from the mirror, and the way that the line is broken reinforces this once again.

Next, there is another seven-word haiku (which seems to be a magic number) that goes back to the traditional format and captures the concepts of life and death, in an innocent way:

a firefly
on the web
lit

Bob Boldman, *Walking with the River*

The main appeal of this haiku for me was the visual picture that Boldman was able to paint with so few words. One does not normally see a firefly in a spider's web. Usually, you'll see flies or moths, but the ray of light in this particular web adds a touch of uniqueness to this situation. The light is also symbolic in a way. The firefly is caught, and assuredly will die soon. However, in the moment that Boldman captured, light shines on as a symbol of this bug's life. In a way, we are all the same way. Our death is ultimately unavoidable, and it's easy to feel trapped by our fate. However, while we are here, we do our best to shine our own light. We show the world we are alive and human, and all actions we take are a part of being human and expressing that in the best way we can. This haiku could easily be taken in either a pessimistic or optimistic way, but so masterfully captures this human dilemma with a few words depicting the reality of life.

Boldman often describes scenes with a combination of realistic sensory details as well as symbolic or metaphorical features. In contrast to Boldman's last example, this haiku depicts a scene with more obviously metaphorical meaning, evening though all of Boldman's work contains deeper meaning:

in her walk everywhere that she's been

Bob Boldman, *Everything i Touch*

The continuous one line gives this haiku direction and movement that mimics the woman's walk. Most of the rest of Boldman's haiku contain spaces or line breaks in some fashion, but this continuation shows a specific sense of purpose and confidence to describe her walk. This itself gives insight to where this woman has been and what she has gone through. By not specifying exactly what that looks like, however, allows for the readers to fill in their own story. I think that this haiku would mostly appeal to Boldman's female audience, who probably have a good idea of what this subject has gone through and common experiences as a woman. In my mind, this woman has faced prejudice and sexism. She did not have anything handed to her, and she had to work harder in a market where women "aren't supposed to be." She has dealt with wage gap and discrimination, and maybe even sexual assault, but has come out stronger because of it. And that it just one of many possible stories that her walk could tell.

Another example of a successful one-line haiku that is able to capture an image or movement in only a few words is below. In this haiku, we go back to Boldman's snapshot of realistic moments in time:

a face wrapping a champagne glass

Bob Boldman, *Everything i Touch*

I chose this haiku that stands on its own from the others because the image was so striking in my mind. I can so vividly see someone sitting next to someone at the dining room table, and the speaker of the haiku noticing their visage warped over the surface of a pristine glass with sparkling champagne (or cider if you're under 21). This haiku can even be another example of perspective, like in the "mirror" haiku. As the glass turns, the face morphs like in one of those carnival mirrors. Nonetheless, the main theme I get from this haiku is keen observation. Sometimes, when life can get overwhelming, I sometimes find myself zoning out, and yet 'zoning in' on simple everyday items and noticing the little details. Within this simple haiku, I very

quickly find myself imagining the whole room, and every little detail of the face and the glass and the setting. Again, Boldman uses intelligent words here to spark that scene and the proceeding imagination for the reader.

So far, we've seen Boldman's expertise in conveying powerful sensory details and images with very few words, as well as his ability to draw meaningful emotions or lessons in the same way. However, it is also apparent that Boldman uses tools like structural placement or divisions to give specific meaning to each word and line. In this next example, Boldman creates a haiku about what I believe to be creating haiku:

leaves blowing into a sentence

Bob Boldman, *Everything i Touch*

This haiku, like the "her walk" haiku is purposefully written without any intentional breaks, which consequently gives it a motion that doesn't exist in his other one-line haiku. I enjoy the image of the leaves blowing, and I can even imagine them swirling. However, my favorite part of this haiku is the clever way in which Boldman depicts writing. This seems to me like Boldman is describing creating haiku as if they almost write themselves. This haiku could perhaps even be a hint into where Boldman draws his inspiration for haiku from. From the content of this haiku, it's clear that nature has some effect on at least some of his haiku, and that instead of forcing a haiku to come from what he looks at, he allows the haiku to sort of write themselves before his eyes. He is merely the recorder of a story that life is already telling. This haiku gives some of the best insight into Boldman's style and haiku philosophy.

The last haiku I've chosen to represent Bob Boldman is fitting, as it is about endings. This haiku is the briefest I could find, and in my opinion, one of the most powerful:

i end in shadow

Bob Boldman, *Everything i Touch*

To me, this haiku is so beautiful. It's so short; just one complete idea to sum up one's identity. One could be ambitious, cruel, successful, greedy, kind, funny, lazy, adventurous, or any quality, but all end in shadow. Whether this shadow is a literal darkness on the sidewalk, or immanent death, the brevity of this haiku makes the message universal. Bob Boldman ends in shadow, as does every reader that encounters this haiku. This may be one of the darkest haiku Boldman has written, but it still remains true to his brief and understated style. Even in this shortest haiku, Boldman is able to capture strong emotions like fear and hopelessness. This is a true exemplar of the success of this type of writing.

Through Bob Boldman's haiku, simplicity can give so much to a reader. As Anita Virgil says about *Everything I Touch*, "Less is ever so much more—always was, still is, in the work of Bob Boldman." Even though the haiku themselves seem simple, it is clear to me after heavy analysis that much work has to be put into every word, and yet it must also happen naturally. Balancing on that fine line is where Bob Boldman has found his success, and I aspire to include elements of his work in my writing as well as he does.

Works Cited

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