

Meghan Hayes
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The Independent Haiku of O Mabson Southard

The art of haiku is often misunderstood. You learn the five-seven-five rule when you're in elementary school, and most people don't learn about haiku further enough to realize that that is not the case. Haiku can also be about something other than nature, but most people don't go out seeking haiku enough to find that out. As a fairly new haiku poet, I have enjoyed playing around with what haiku is to me. Personally, I like to write haiku about human experience versus nature. I enjoy capturing moments that I and hopefully the reader will connect with. O Mabson Southard had a very similar view on haiku, although he wrote more nature haiku than I do. In the forward of *Deep Shade Flickering Sunlight*, the poet's daughter, Barbara Southard, states that he believed that, "it is independence of mind and heart that allows feelings to flow deep and true. The words follow," (*Deep Shade* 12). For that reason, I chose to respond to O Southard's work.

O Mabson Southard was an American haiku poet from New England. O Southard never had a typical career path to becoming a poet. He studied at Harvard for two years, then after surviving tuberculosis decided to pursue an unconventional lifestyle. He ended up earning a degree in anthropology at the University of Alaska, before moving to New York City with his family and starting a moving van business and a chess magazine. He did not start writing haiku until the fifties when he started studying Oriental philosophy and literature. He studied Japanese and his first haiku was published in *American Haiku* in 1963. In the late sixties, O Southard started being influenced by feminist thought. This is shown in his haiku, calling every woman he encounters "sister," which is extremely confusing when reading his poetry for the first time and thinking he's solely talking about his biological sister, Anne. Which, thankfully, he wasn't.

In regard to haiku, O Southard believed that they should be based on experience. He dismissed any deliberate symbolism in his poetry brought about by critics, for he only wrote from his experienced events. This led him to write many haiku about his experiences in nature while he lived in Hawaii. His haiku are simple because that is how he thought our senses work. Unfortunately, O Southard died in 2000 so I was unable to interview him for this paper. However, the forward by his daughter and some online biography searching were very helpful to me in understanding where O Southard got his inspiration from. I would love to be able to go back and have coffee with him and pick his brain about the art of haiku since we seem to have similar views on the art form.

The following are haiku from O Southard that stood out to me from this collection of O Southard's work and I will share my personal responses to them with you.

Snow no longer falls
left in the sky this morning –
a scatter of stars

– O Mabson Southard, *DSFS*, 18

As a Minnesotan, the snow is a big part of my life, which made this particular haiku stand out to me. The words are filled with joy and newfound hope. The alliteration in this haiku is very strong and used appropriately. Scatter is such an interesting word to use to describe the pattern of the stars. This haiku brought me to a cabin in the woods. Maybe it's Christmas Eve, maybe it's just a normal night. It doesn't matter, the people staying in the cabin are enjoying their time together no matter the calendar date. It has been snowing for hours and hours and the people staying in the cabin thought it would never stop. Not that they wanted it to, they are perfectly happy in their little cabin. They wake up the next day and see that it had finally stopped. The stars shine brighter than ever. This haiku captured this moment perfectly. The sweet simplicity of this haiku brought a lovely image to my mind and I very much enjoyed experiencing it.

The path leads to nowhere;
 whoever made it and why –
 no one seems to know

– O Mabson Southard, *DSFS*, 21

There is so much mystery in this haiku. I've reread this haiku about ten times trying to figure out what happened to this path. In my mind's eye, I see a road that used to lead to somewhere, as if many years ago this road was an important one. Something significant used to be at the end of this path. But it has since been removed and now forgotten, the path is now grown over with grass and cracked with neglect. The weeds are waist high and so thick that you can barely see through them. I can imagine myself finding this path on a walk with my dogs and deciding to try to find out what is at the end of the road. The line "whoever made it and why," in particular makes my haiku-senses tingle. This haiku makes me filled with curiosity and a little bit of fear. What if something bad happened at the end of the path that caused it to lead to nowhere? Every inch of my being wants to travel down this road, and it's so sad that I won't ever know where this road may be. I'll have to go find my own forgotten road one day.

As its final gifts
 the old tree bears a small leaf
 and a large apple

– O Mabson Southard, *DSFS*, 38

I am at peace when reading this haiku. There is something so beautiful about how O Southard illustrates the tree's death. As someone who is afraid of death, this haiku actually makes me feel at ease thinking of this tree dying. The image that O Southard painted is so serene that it is almost impossible to feel negative feelings about this haiku. I imagine the tree as one from *The Wizard of Oz*, having hands and the ability to smile. The tree is old, with its bark peeling and gray. I see the gentle smile from the tree as he sets down his last gift to this earth – a simple, red apple. I feel a sense of calm from the tree. He knows that his legacy will continue on. The apple is the key to a new life. This old tree can live again if the seeds from his fruit are planted. There is something so simple, yet so beautiful in that image. This haiku shows the two-sided coin of human existence. With death, there will always be life that comes from it, and vice-versa. This moment and feeling are beautifully captured by O Southard in this haiku.

Rising from the sea
 past dark-profiled rainy cliffs
 a dense cloud of stars

– O Mabson Southard, *DSFS*, 45

This haiku is a "traditional" haiku in the sense that it follows the five-seven-five rule and is about a natural occurrence. This haiku is my favorite of his that isn't about human existence and life. The imagery is so strong in this haiku that it took my breath away from me the first time I read it. There are so many different natural elements to it. When thinking of stars, it is not common to hear of them rising from the sea. Describing it like that adds an element of movement to the haiku. Then, the addition of rain adds an opposite force to the rising, as rain falls from the sky. Both elements of motion work in tandem to create a beautiful mental image. Describing the density of the cloud of stars really adds to the image as a whole. As I read this haiku, I feel as though I am sitting on the cliffs in the midst of the storm, which is exactly what I believe haiku should do to the reader.

From the surf, moonrise...

Between waves, the girls compare
their foamy bosoms

– O Mabson Southard, *DSFS*, 53

This haiku drew me in because of its playful energy. I am immediately placed in a vacation mindset. With the imagery and vocabulary, it places the reader into the haiku. Personally, I can see my best friends and I vacationing somewhere near the ocean and deciding to go skinny dipping for the hell of it. My friends and I are so close that this idea would never be weird for us, and we would most definitely compare our breasts together just because of how our relationship works. This haiku perfectly captures this moment. The language O Southard uses in this haiku is very whimsical, which aids in its imagery. “Between waves,” adds an element of casual energy. As if the breast comparison is a side thought, not really something of importance. The use of the word foamy I also enjoy. It is not a word that I come across often in the readings I partake in, so it caught my eye to see it used in O Southard’s work. The moment is captured by the haiku which is what I think should happen in haiku.

Forgetting the bluets
he’s just bought me – he buys me
with the summer sky

with Malia Southard
– O Mabson Southard, *DSFS*, 98

This haiku may be my favorite of O Southard’s collection. The concept is so simple, which makes it so powerful. Again, the alliteration makes this haiku much stronger. It aids in the visual of the haiku. It is also interesting how they chose bluets as the flowers given to the woman because it reflects the color of the sky that he buys her with. It was like he tried to “buy” the sky for her with the flowers but ended up not needing to because the sky was all she wanted. This haiku gives me such a clear image in my mind. I can easily drop into this imaginary situation. My significant other is a poet, so I usually see him in my mind when I read romantic poetry. I see us together, on a picnic date. It’s June, so it’s not too hot but still warm enough to be comfortable outdoors. He’s bought me flowers, but we’ve both forgotten about them. We are too enwrapped in each other. We laugh and talk and eat together. We lay on our backs and look at the clouds passing by. He points out one shaped like a heart, and we both chuckle at how cheesy it is. I don’t care about the flowers; all I need is his company. This haiku makes me warm inside and out, which is why I connect with it so intensely. I also enjoy that he co-wrote this haiku with his wife. It warms my heart to see couples who collaborate together on art, particularly on haiku. It adds even more personality to have both of them writing about an experience that they most likely had together. This makes my heart full, which is what art is supposed to do, right?

Boating, we make love...
Her sudden joy sweeps us both
through a batch of waves

– O Mabson Southard, *DSFS*, 104

There have not been many haiku that I have read about making love, but I think this haiku is the most beautiful depiction of it. This haiku has a spontaneous feeling to it, which drew me to it in the first place. But what makes me the warmest is the way he describes his partner’s pleasure. The way he writes it is not selfish whatsoever. Stereotypically, men are self-centered when it comes to physical pleasure and don’t focus on their partner’s pleasure. But not in this haiku, which was fresh to my eye. He is fully focused on his partner’s orgasm, so much so that it even overcomes him. The image of physical love on a boat is very interesting to me. Boating typically represents adventure and/or a journey of sorts. So I have to wonder if this physical love

session was a new adventure, as he was in an open marriage. The image of ocean waves after the woman's orgasm is interesting because orgasms are usually described as coming in waves, so that is very fitting to the situation O Southard is describing.

Off with that old cloak...
Let her wild skirts ebb and flow
round her dancing feet

with Malia Southard
– O Southard, *DSFS*, 100

There is so much freedom within this haiku. The description of her skirts as ebbing and flowing is gorgeous because it reflects the movement of the sea which is probably the freest being on this planet. In my mind, I see an older woman who has been kept down her whole life by the people around her. She has been told what to do, what to say, and how to live her life by others in her life. I see this moment expressed in the haiku as her breaking point. She says, "I don't give a crap what you think I should be doing. I'm going to dance." She tosses of her metaphorical cloak and dances. She is not good at it, but the important thing is that she dances. She is free at last. Additionally, I enjoy his collaboration with his wife for a haiku about a woman. It adds a feminine aspect to the haiku that may not have been there if he wrote this haiku alone. The two seemed to collaborate very well together. I would love to see more of Malia's work.

O Southard's use of ellipses in his haiku are interesting. He seems to use them as a period, capitalizing the first letter of the second line. This is a pattern in his haiku. They add character to his style of writing, but it is a little confusing to the untrained eye, as it is not a trail off as ellipses are usually thought as. Overall, this haiku has extremely strong imagery which aids in its capturing of the moment. I can clearly see this woman dancing which is how haiku should affect the reader.

A trim, quiet girl
comes tripping along the path–
and I ask the way

– O Southard, *DSFS*, 75

The image captured by this haiku reminds me of the beginning of a great love story. In modern literature, this moment where two souls meet is called a "meet-cute." It's like when two characters bump into each other and drop their things and their hands touch on one of the dropped items. In my mind, I see this boy as a freshman on a college campus, not knowing where his next class is located. He asks this pretty and semi-awkward girl for directions and she has a class in the same building, so they walk the path to where they need to go, a flame starting to grow between them. The word choice of tripping to describe the way the girl is coming down the path is very interesting to me. It adds a sense of haste to it. This makes me think that he felt a desperate need to talk to this girl, despite her being obviously in a hurry because he knew that she was someone who would be a very important part of his life. I wonder if this is a haiku about O Southard's wife, Malia. If it is, my heart would be full. This mental image is so strong in my soul that I am getting shivers from it. That is exactly what I believe haiku should do to the reader– make them feel something.

O Mabson Southard's haiku bring about many different emotions to his readers. He has the ability to freely explore the art of haiku, writing the standard five-seven-five haiku and his own form throughout this collection of haiku. His haiku are simple at first glance, but once you take a closer look you can see how deeply convoluted, they are. He writes about his own experiences; ones that happened in nature and others that happened in his personal life and personal journey. I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know O Southard through reading this collection of his haiku. His addition to the art of North American haiku will not be forgotten — I won't let it.

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Works Cited

Brooks, Randy M., and Barbara Southard, editors. *Deep Shade Flickering Sunlight: Selected Haiku of O Mabson Southard*. Decatur, IL, Brooks Books, 2004.