

Jan Bostok: Poet of Sensation

Jan Bostok is an Australian haiku poet who is known for having a distinctly human voice in the haiku world. She frequently employs the use of the one lined haiku in order to intentionally obscure the meaning behind her poetry or better put, to allow the reader room to explore the many ways in which her words might be interpreted. Along this thread there is a noted lack of punctuation across all of her works, opening up her poetry further. What initially drew me to Bostok was her deliberate use of words within her work. Her shining word choice leaves each phrase markedly important, and deeply engaging. I am a sucker for a beautiful phrase, and Bostok's poetry is chalk full of breathtaking images and witty lines. When a word in one of Bostok's poems stands out, further examination reveals that to be the exact word that was necessary for the haiku to function. If haiku is the poetry of sensation, then Bostok is the poet of sensation.

Moreover, Bostok's subject material is oftentimes intensely personal, deeply sympathetic, and acutely aware of the dissonance/harmony between mankind and nature. Rather than isolating the natural world from humanity, Bostok melds human concerns with the natural world to create a vessel with which the reader can explore their own connection to the world around them.

Lastly, A deep sense of empathy and understanding is shown in Jan's work in regards to the innate humanness of others. Bostok engages with the difficult task of finding the close emotional world that resides within the most distant and seemingly other strangers, and works to reveal that interconnectivity within all of us in her poetry

we travel the mind hesitant at crossroads

Bostok, Graffiti, 23

In this haiku Bostok depicts the image of uncertainty with crystal clarity. The form of the haiku, being only one line, creates many paths upon which to read this haiku adding to the feeling of uncertainty that the reader feels. Perhaps the sentence is read, "we travel/the mind hesitant/at crossroads," or maybe, "we travel the mind/hesitant at crossroads," or any other number of ways in which emphasis can be divided. However, one thing is clear this is a mind that has yet to make a decision. This is an excellent example of how form can work to serve function within haiku.

Swirling earth slowly settles over the disappearing echidna

Bostok, Graffiti, 31

Once again, Bostok ensnares us in this one lined haiku, by leaving many interpretations open for examination. Without any punctuation or line breaks she allows many readings of this haiku to reveal themselves. Perhaps the haiku is read "swirling/earth slowly settles over the disappearing echidna," or maybe "swirling earth/slowly settles over/the disappearing echidna." While the differences may appear subtle they vastly change the meaning of the haiku. You see, the echidna is a small porcupine/anteater like mammal that is native to Bostok's country, Australia, and is rapidly going extinct due to habitat loss caused by humanity. With this information it becomes clear that the "swirling earth" not only refers to the dirt kicked up by the echidna burrowing into it's hole, but the swirling of the earth, moving at a breakneck speed and wiping the echidna from history. It is a sad haiku, but one that provokes thought and shows that Bostok has a point of view. She is revealing to us the turmoil that we have caused in the world, and how it is

affecting nature. This haiku does not have balance between the natural world and the humans that inhabit it. There is a sense of something being lost forever, disappearing before our eyes.

The stillborn' a photo-
In my day they refused
to let me see

Bostok, Graffiti, 19

While this haiku is intensely sad, it also manages to find a spark of hope. Of course, the loss of a pregnancy due to stillbirth is a terrible thing, but the note of change that is brought in by the photograph gives the haiku a sense that things get better over time. This another great example of how Bostok leverages her life experience within her haiku, writing about subjects that are intensely personal for her, but also experiences that are shared by countless people. I would hope that anyone dealing with the loss of a child or struggling with conception might find comfort in the small parcel of light that Bostok uncovers.

No one home disappointment gnaws into our silence

Bostok, Graffiti, 23

In this haiku Bostok is starkly confronting us with the reality of a hard interaction with another person. She does not give us any of the details of the situation, but by implying that there was a mutual desire to find someone else at home, and letting us in on the silence between the two subjects it is apparent that something is wrong. But she contrasts this silence, this mutual disengagement from the other, by letting the subjects share silence. It is "our silence." The common ground of this haiku is found in its seeming difference. Perhaps Bostok did not extend any olive branches to this person at the time that these events were unfolding, but she certainly lets the reader in on their connection in hindsight.

Additionally, the use of the word gnaw is particularly grating in this haiku. The act of gnawing is to slowly chew at something, and the idea of something slowly chewing at the silence suggests that there is something that is being left unsaid. It leaves the reader wondering if the two will ever resolve their supposed problem, and it also piques interest into the situation. Who was supposed to be home? What is the relationship between the two silent subjects arriving together? What is being left unsaid? All of these questions arise from one simple line, and that is a sign of a great haiku.

Bushfire country all the brick chimneys standing

Bostok, Graffiti, 25

This haiku is a particularly striking find in how it paints an image of human creation devastated by fire. With the rapid approach of irreversible self-inflicted climate change and about 100 years of unsustainable zero-tolerance fire legislation we are living in a time where forest fires are becoming more and more frequent and destructive. What I find particularly interesting about this depiction of land ravaged by fire is the unintended remnants. This haiku evokes a sense of wonder and awe. Bostok's use of the word "standing" in this haiku is also very deliberate, it is an action of mankind to stand; and it is a symbol of defiance to remain standing. However, the haiku does not give me the sense that the resilience is in humanity, but in nature finding solidarity with itself.

The cicada's shrill
Close - the heat seems
More intense

Bostok, Graffiti, 26

This haiku is another great example of how Bostok weaves nature with humanity. While the humanness of this haiku is not directly stated, it can be implied in her noting of the “more intense [...] heat” of the summer.

You see, cicadas are an intensely seasonal insect. There are over 3,000 subspecies of Cicada, and they have evolved to emerge from underground in extremely predictable intervals with most species coming above ground to breed every 1-9 years and some species emerging only once every 17. Even more so Cicada's produce a very rhythmic beating sound by buckling and unbuckling an organ known as the tymbals. Needless to say, Cicada's are a symbol of regularity, so with this knowledge the abnormality of the heat within this haiku is amplified. This forces the reader to ask the question, Why has the heat intensified? Of course, the answer to this is rapid climate change brought about by the release of Carbon into the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels.

Of course, there is another reading of this in which Bostok is only alluding to the heat of the summer, but instead referring to the heat of the Cicada, which has come above ground to mate. Perhaps, the mating call is particularly loud this year. Either way Bostok gives us an intriguing set of 3 lines with layers of meaning to uncover.

Walking...
The rain softly falling
In my hair

Bostok, Graffiti, 33

In this haiku we see an excellent example of how Bostok seamlessly blends the natural world with the reality of a human experiencing nature. The rain is not just being observed, but it is interacting with Bostok. There is also a very deliberate use of the word “in,” in line 3, literally blending Bostok with the rain. I also appreciate the use of the word softly to describe the rain, suggesting that the rain is being welcomed by Bostok as a companion on her walk. The haiku seems to have two subjects who are moving through the world in tandem. The rain does not ask too much of Bostok and Bostok does not ask too much of the rain, and the world of this haiku is balanced.

Soft autumn rain
Drops
Cling to his hair

Bostok, Graffiti, 33

Here we see a similar idea as the previous haiku, except Bostok is now the observer rather than the one experiencing. Again the rain is soft, and in this case the rain is also autumnal (the season of change/literally the old falling away) immediately giving the reader a sense of gentle anticipation. We then see that drops is centered, placing emphasis on the landing of the rain but also on the attention of the Bostok. The drops are clinging to his hair. We don't know who the subject is, but we can sense that Bostok is centering this person. The use of the word clings also suggests that the rain does not want to leave this person. All of these elements combined allow the reader to experience the man with the rain in his hair who has captured Bostok's attention. It is lovely.

So long ago
The wedding ring
No longer fits

Bostok, Graffiti, 40

What I love about this haiku is that it is telling of the long life that Bostok lead, and the many different courses that her life took. She traveled the world and wrote haiku for many years. And this haiku really gives the reader a sense of depth to her life (and to life in general). For something as powerful and symbolic as a wedding ring to be cast aside or removed because of death or divorce is a terribly powerful thing. But for Bostok to take that symbol and trivialize it, is surprising and illuminating (as a great haiku should be). The wedding ring no longer fits, but more than that, the marriage no longer fits. Living through something as distressing as the end of a serious relationship can feel like the end of the world; it can seem like something that is impossible to get past. But in this haiku Bostok simply acknowledges that it is a ring that no longer fits. it is nothing more. The power of that moment is lost, and it cannot be reclaimed, nor does Bostok suggest that she has any desire to reclaim what was lost.

Sunflower
Not this way
This morning

Bostok, Graffiti, 32

In closing out my thoughts on Bostok I thought it fitting to include the Haiku that initially drew me to her poetry. In this Haiku we see a sad image of a sunflower facing away from us, but then we consider that the Sunflower grows towards the sun. This morning is not the morning that the sunflower looks upon us. We are not the subject that, to which the sunflower turns his seedy gaze, but the sunflower still shows us the way. The sunflower is pointing us in the direction of the light, a path that we too can follow. To live a life as full as Bostok's is to make mistakes and to stumble down the wrong path's, to wind up in marriages that end or tragedies that strike, to see the world change around you for better and worse. But through it all is the sunflower pointing the way ahead. It is not this way. It is not this morning. but perhaps the next.

Works Cited

Bostok, Janice , "Amongst the Graffiti: Collected Haiku and Senryu 1972--2002," The Haiku Foundation Digital Library, accessed November 18, 2021, <https://thehaikufoundation.org/omeka/items/show/12>.