

Marlene Mountain: The State of the Earth

by Audrey Button
April 14, 2022

As someone who finds inspiration for my haiku from the natural world, I was immediately drawn to the haiku written by Marlene Mountain. While I like to focus on the marvel and beauty of nature, Mountain is unafraid to take a critical look at the way nature is harmed by humankind. One of the first haiku that I read by Mountain that explores her view on the destruction of nature was:

old pond a frog rises belly up

Mountain, THA, 135

There is something gloomy in how short and too the point this haiku is. It makes me think of an eerie, foggy lake surrounded by overgrown greenery. I see the pond itself being green from the algae that has been built up over time, blocking out the sunlight and therefore the oxygen, killing everything living inside of it. The way that the frog is described too is shocking. It seems like the frog is just going to be coming out of the pond normally, but you quickly realize that the frog is no longer alive. I think that Mountain was aiming to surprise her audience in the way that she surprised me, to take a poetic form that is usually focused on appreciating beauty but showing the sad reality of what is happening to the natural world.

While Mountain does not shy away from talking about the horror done to nature, she also has an appreciation for it as seen in the following haiku:

o g
r
f frog

Marlene Mountain, THA, 132

Looking at these two haiku back-to-back shows the diverse ways that Mountain talks about nature. From talking about a dead frog in a polluted pond, to simulating the leap and croak of a frog through haiku shows that even though Mountain is unafraid to speak out about the issues involving nature, it comes from a place of love and devotion to try to save it. While I read this haiku, I can picture a frog leaping across the ground and then just stopping and sitting, taking in the world around it. The arc of the word frog also makes me think of the sound of a frog croaking. It's like the long, stretching word replicates the tone of the frog. I can also imagine a person hearing this croak and then noting in their head that they just heard a frog.

u n
 o d
 l o e r
 f l e r
 l d
 u n

Mountain, UH

While reading different selections by Mountain, I noticed that she has numerous haiku where she arranges the letters in ways that makes them appear like a picture. The second frog haiku was from the same collection as this flounder haiku. Unlike the frog haiku, the words flounder are spaced in a way that makes a fish which I think is very clever! I appreciate how Mountain steps out of the box of what the “rules” of haiku are supposed to be and makes it her own. I also think that letter spacing the bottom half of the fish is so clever, the way the f and the l are separated from the words makes it spell under on the underbelly of the fish! I think that haiku like this that are so simple can be extremely charming and stretch the creativity of the author as well as the audience.

As I was reading haiku by Mountain, I came across her book of selections, *the old tin roof*. I appreciated the variety of haiku that she had. She explored topics like country life and family memories as well as exploring different ways of writing her haiku from making shapes out of her haiku, like previously shown, to single line haiku. One of my favorites was:

tonight
 less tomorrow
 will do

Mountain, TOTR, 170

This haiku reminds me of late nights staying up with friends and good conversations. No one wants that night to end so everyone decides to stay awake until the very early morning and to just sleep away the entire next day. This haiku feels so simple, and I think does a great job of reflecting the easy nature of conversations or the moment you pause to watch your friends enjoy themselves. I see myself in this haiku when I am at my friend’s house until the early hours of the morning and the exact point where I make the decision in my mind to stay as long as I can, not caring about what I have to do the next day.

I noticed while reading *the old tin roof*, some of her haiku were clever and did not always make sense or were simple observations that she made into haiku. An example of one of the very clever haiku that I read was:

Five-seven-five-haik(u)!

Mountain, TOTR, 183

I had to laugh after reading this. It is so simple yet so fun. I think that every person who is taught haiku as a kid learned that a haiku must be arranged with syllables in a five-seven-five order, but after taking this class I have learned that that is not the case. I think it is funny how she just arranges this phrase into a single line, it is like she is challenging anyone who follows the five-seven-five rule. I think that this challenge is driven home with the (u) at the end. I read this last bit as if she is inviting the reader to try breaking the rules of haiku as well, and that haiku is a much more open poetic form than one might originally believe. The exclamation mark is a sign of excitement to break boundaries and to have fun with haiku.

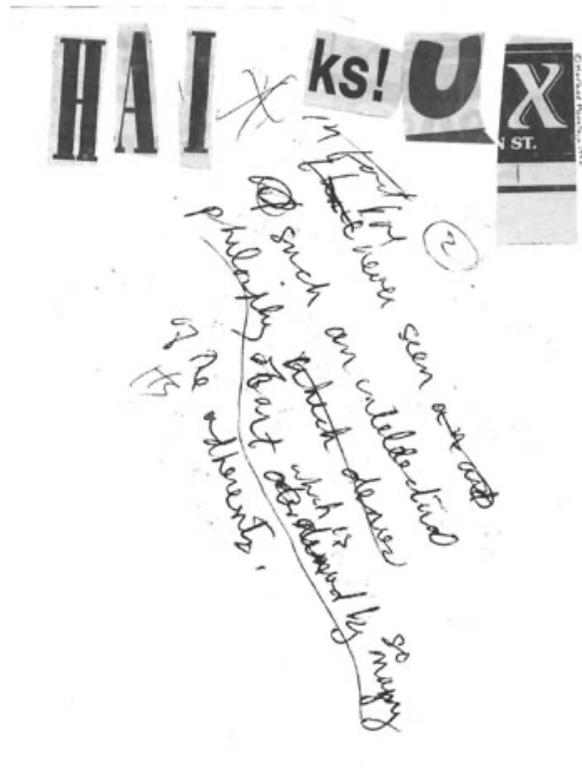
Another haiku that I read that breaks the boundaries of haiku was:

ing

Mountain, TOTR, 185

I was very confused and caught off guard when I first read this haiku, I thought that I was missing something or that it connected to a previous haiku. If it does, I did not notice, and I think that it is just a haiku that simply says “ing.” Using the -ing ending is interesting and it makes me think that Mountain is active in her thought and is thinking of all of the things that she could be doing, or maybe that she is doing. It is an invitation to the author to be running, or playing, maybe even sleeping. No matter what it is you are ing-ing, Mountain seems like she is excited that you are.

Mountain has made it clear in her work that she is all about breaking the rules of what haiku have been traditionally. From single line haiku to single syllable haiku, Mountain is bold in how she writes her haiku. She even explores the medium that she uses to write her haiku. Rather than simply writing them down, Mountain explores paintings and cutting out letters from newspapers and magazines. The following image is titled “hai” and was made in 1992:

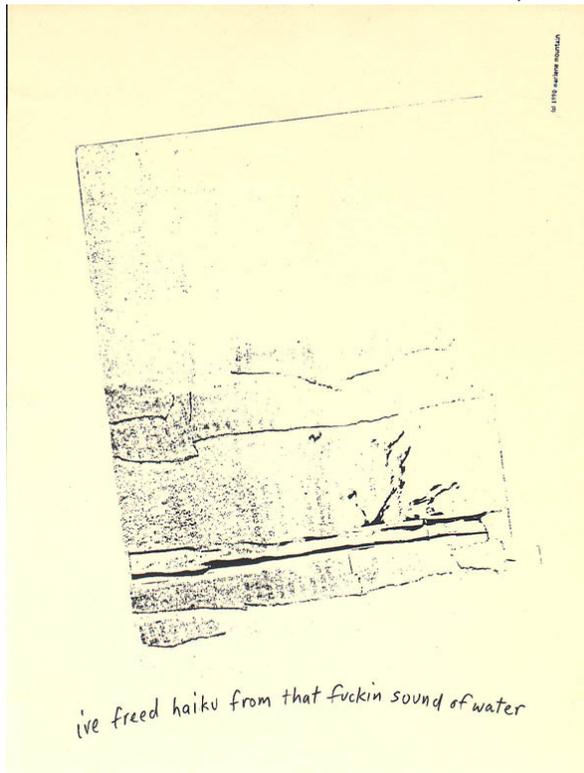


The first part of this haiku that drew my attention was the word haiku at the top. It reminded me of a ransom note with the letters cut out. I also thought about the similarities to this and one of her haiku that I mentioned previously:

Five-seven-five-haik(u)!
Mountain, TOTR, 183

The letter “u” was intentionally placed in this piece, like it was in the haiku from *the old tin roof*. I also think that the exclamation mark used in both haiku was interesting. Even though they were used in different places, I still think that they both represent the excitement for haiku and how exciting it can be to write haiku in inventive ways. I also noticed the “x” in the middle of hai-ku and to the right of the “u.” I wonder if the “x” is supposed to stand for the word “cross,” like Mountain is connecting the written text with the printed. While on the topic of the text, Mountain has written some kind of note below the word haiku. Some words are crossed out, like she is making notes for herself on her haiku and improving it, but leaving the edits for the reader to see. As much as I tried to read her handwriting, I struggled to read anything other than the first line, but I think that it adds to the charm of it. After further contemplation, I noticed that there is a check mark written in the same “x” separating hai-ku. I think that this further drives home the fact that she is using this haiku to show her editing process, that there are things that she likes about her initial haiku, but she is not afraid to make changes to it to make it even better. I think that the “x” at the end of the word is also representative of her corrections and her acknowledgement that she is a messy person who likes to write messy haiku.

A final example of Mountain's exploration of different mediums that she makes haiku with, and I think a haiku that shows her character, is:



Mountain, IP

This poster is from a collection of work by Mountain called “intimate posters.” It is titled “crone/I’ve freed haiku” and while I struggle to see a clear figure in this image, I do see a body of water with a bird flying over it. I think that the lines on the right side of the image could be the crone sitting by the water, possibly hating the sound of running water. I think that the haiku written underneath it sums up how Mountain writes her haiku; she is not tied down to any topic and will write haiku about whatever she wants and however she wants to do it. I think she takes immense pride in the ways that she breaks the rules of what people expect haiku to be and sees these rules as a challenge stretch and break away from them. While reading this haiku, I can imagine an elderly person listening to the sound of water and finding divine inspiration from the world around them, with Mountain staring at them and judging them for not being more creative with how they write their haiku.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading the work by Marlene Mountain. I found inspiration through her haiku for my own to not be so rigid with myself and that I can write about many different topics and write out my haiku in many ways. Mountain is contrarian and brave, and her passion for haiku bleeds from everything that she writes.

Work Cited

<https://www.marlenemountain.org/contents.html>

<https://www.thehaikufoundation.org/omeka/files/original/5ceedb429725eb73a401ea0e210d1d65.pdf>

https://www.marlenemountain.org/unaloudhaiku/uh_flounder.gif

https://www.marlenemountain.org/posters/cs_ivefreed.jpg