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Reflections on Sunrise:
Peter Yovu's Use of Ambiguity in the Art of Haiku

Sunrise by Peter Yovu — I picked this book up from our seemingly endless selection of kukai prizes because the cover art caught my eye. The red, black, and purple lines and swooshes align in some places to create human faces, birds, and eyes of unidentifiable creatures. They are curiosities asking a reader to look inside and crack the code of their mystery. Inside the front cover, I found that the art was done by Yovu, evidently finding that if you want an artistic representation done right, you have to do it yourself. There is also a dedication to his “Brevarian friends,” along with a thank you to Jim Kacian, another haiku poet who I recently learned about through *Haiku: The Art of the Short Poem*. Although I was already curious about the collection of poems, and had an idea I would likely enjoy them from the artistry I could already see, I was not quite prepared for what lay in wait on the pages ahead.

Upon googling Yovu for a bit more insight into his motivations for writing haiku, I found a video from The Haiku Foundation's “Reading Series,” which features several haiku poets doing a brief interviews and readings of their work, and explaining some aspects of their writing process along with possible interpretations and motivations which went into their poems. In Yovu's video, he is reading from *Sunrise* and explains how he tries to write in a way which is unexpected or unexplainable, but still can be felt by his audience in a way of understanding. He says:

“one sense that I have about poetry is that it's almost best, you know, to somewhat disengage the left brain and just let the right brain grab onto something and do what it wants to. You know the left brain can come in later and analyze it a bit, but when you're hearing it, it's best to almost say ‘I'm not gonna know what this means’ and if you do that, my sense is—you'll know what it means.”

To me, this indicated that Yovu wanted his poetry to be read aloud, and that this would facilitate the understanding of some of his more abstract poems. It was helpful to see the style which his readings were in, and how he enunciated certain sounds or words to create meaning, and then alternative meanings with different readings.

Upon first glance, some of Yovu's haiku appear to be essentially nonsensical, but he wants the reader to create meaning and understanding out of his work as they read the poem aloud, and thinks that the reader can come to understand, following the process. Later in the video, Yovu also mentions that his poems may have dual, or even more than two meanings, depending on how they are read. Of course, good haiku often relies on an openness to interpretation by the reader. Yovu's literary art goes beyond that simple openness though, as his wording often raises questions in the reader about what we feel when we see the poem. How we initially interpret it says a lot about our internal thought process.

under a budding maple
all that I am
unable to say

Peter Yovu, *Sunrise*

Throughout Yovu's work, I found what I want to call "pivot words." These pivot words are the shift in the poem between meanings. In this example, the word would be "am." The setting is clear — under the budding maple, but the speaker's intentions are not. In one reading, one might take this poem to mean that the speaker is unable to express what they want to say. Under the budding maple, a person hopelessly contemplates what they know but cannot speak about. In an alternate reading, one could say the speaker is unable to say what they are. Under the budding maple, this person questions their substance or their meaning in life.

sunrise darkens the face I dream with

Peter Yovu, *Sunrise*

In this haiku, the pivot word is "darkens." The sunrise is the objective state which the poem exists within, but the subject this time is unclear. Is the subject the sunrise or the face? In one reading, the sun shining through a window could be casting a shadow on another sleeper, darkening their face. In a less obvious reading, the sunrise itself is darkening, perhaps becoming less exciting as time has passed in the speaker's life. Perhaps the "sunrise darkening" is a complicated way of saying the sunset, indicating that the speaker is going to put their darker, "dreaming face" on. My last possible interpretation is that the sunrise is darkening the speaker's spirit, the sun rising taking the speaker out of their dream state and darkening their face, bringing them back to reality. In any case, this poem is where Yovu draws the title of his book from, and the ambiguity of the poem makes it a perfect representative for the entirety of *Sunrise's* themes and style.

in a foreign place
all the places
we never left

Peter Yovu, *Sunrise*

This time, the word is "places." The foreign place setting is concrete, but the other settings in the poem are not. The poem can be read as finding a home in every new place. In each foreign place, there will be something familiar to hold on to. Perhaps nothing can feel truly new as long as you are there and have brought with you some artifacts of your life elsewhere, or even just your beliefs into a new place. It can also be read as saying that you never leave each foreign place you experience truly. You will always carry the experience and knowledge with you from then forward. The place also holds on to a little bit of you. It holds your time, which you can never get back. Perhaps your footprints, your trash, your donations will forever remain in the foreign place, or some trace of your existence. You can never truly leave, without some memory or part of yourself staying.

in a seed I don't know the answer

Peter Yovu, *Sunrise*

"I," this time, acts as the pivot. This poem is a little more complex, though it still fits the theory. The seed is the concrete image. The first reading can be the speaker finding the seed and is projecting their own feelings of confusion onto it. Finding the seed triggers a question in the speaker, one they cannot answer. In the

second reading, the speaker finds a seed they “don’t know,” implying they have found something new which gives them the answer they have been searching for. In the beginning life of the seed, there lies a secret which fulfills the speaker’s needs.

mountain moonrise
the sound I didn’t know
I had in me

Peter Yovu, *Sunrise*

Once again, “I” (the one preceding “had”) is the pivot word here. Yovu’s lack of hesitation to insert himself in his poetry works well, and I do not think self should be avoided in haiku perhaps as much as it is. Yovu leaving little pieces of his own feelings for the reader to discover in his haiku adds to the experience and does not diminish the ambiguous form of haiku. He also gives us beautiful imagery in this haiku particularly, with the setting “mountain moonrise,” such an unusual time and place to go together, but a beautiful spiritual image which truly touches the reader and tells them everything they need to know to create a scene. This acts as the concrete image this time.

In this haiku, the first interpretation could be a straight reading — the speaker makes a sound they perhaps did not think themselves capable of. Some sort of deep connection to the earth in this moment may have sparked a need to make a noise previously unknown. The second possibility is breaking the poem at “I,” perhaps the speaker realizing that a sound they heard was actually of their own creation. This is a bit more of an unsettling interpretation, perhaps suggesting some sort of insanity or lack of connection with the self. The sound they don’t know, was their own sound. However, this does resolve, as they realize their sound as their creation, resolving the conflict within themselves.

fire all at once I never had a future

Peter Yovu, *Sunrise*

This haiku has more of a pivot phrase, in “all at once.” All of these words shift potential meaning in my two interpretations. The first is to say that the fire happened all at once, wiping out any potential of a future in the literal or metaphorical space which was burned. The speaker says they never had a future, but perhaps at one point they thought they could have, but the plans of the fire was a sort of divine, powerful force which always existed with the intention of destroying the future which the speaker longed for. The second interpretation is to pause after reading fire, giving the word a more metaphorical meaning, a fire being anything which destroys quickly and definitively.

I found that the slower I read Yovu’s haiku, the more meanings I could find in them — experimenting with pauses, with the way words were said, and with emphasis created new poems out of the same words. The intention and care which went into these haiku is very unique and brings new perspective to what a haiku can be. Many more of the selections in the book were enlightening, and beautiful, even the ones with less ambiguity than those featured here. Yovu captures the attention of the reader by alternating feelings of fear or rage with intense moments of clarity and love for the world around us.

All of these haiku avoid unnecessary punctuation, letting the language and line breaks speak for themselves. Many of them are one line, and offer a lot of freedom in reading, a lot of collaborative space between author and reader. In the closing page of the book, Yovu offers a small biography about himself, saying “he continues to find himself in the confluence of spirituality, psychology and art.” These themes were all clear to me when getting to know his style as an artist in haiku, and a person who wants to help his readers understand a little more about themselves and the world around them with each new poem.

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Works Cited

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