

One morning over breakfast my girlfriend, Milana, told me about an old boyfriend of hers who had self-published a chapbook of haiku. *Peripheries*, he'd called it. He carried dozens of copies around with him in a hemp shoulder bag and sometimes read his poems at open mikes and on street corners.

"He sounds like a jackass," I said.

"Well, I thought it was wonderful that he *had* a passion," Milana replied.

At the age of twenty-three I was still learning when to speak and when to stay silent. It was a painful process. This, I realized, was one of those times to refrain from saying what I was really thinking. So even though I wanted to demean the guy some more, I decided to let it go. I wasn't going to let the ghost of this Steven Trimm character and his hemp sack get me into a pointless quarrel with my beautiful girlfriend. After all, Milana was living with me, not him.

"I agree. Here's to Steven," I said, toasting with my orange-pineapple juice. "Out on the periphery."

"You think everything's a joke, but for your information, being an artist takes a lot of courage." Milana was a modern dancer and had many artist friends, whereas I was still floating around two years after graduation, working a dead-end job for the city of Buffalo. "It also takes hard work and dedication," she said.

"I know that," I said, "but *Peripheries*? It just sounds so earnest."

"You think it's easy to write a haiku?" she said. "I'd like to see you try it."

A buddy of mine, Tim, had recently taught me an all-purpose phrase that he said worked like a charm with his girlfriend. "You're right, honey," I said, reciting Tim's lines. "I am wrong. Honey, I was insensitive."

Milana just stared at me. "What's that you're doing?"

"What?"

"Are you imitating a robot?"

"No! I'm saying that you are right. I am wrong. I was insensitive."

"So you admit that you can't write a haiku, and that it's difficult?"

"I am sorry," I tried again. "You are right. I am wrong. Honey, I was insensitive."

"Fine. You admit it then, Mr. Roboto," she said. "You're mocking another person's attempt to be creative because you're scared to try anything like that yourself, and you're intimidated by people who do."

One thing about me: I love a challenge. "Fuck that," I said. "What's a haiku pattern? Five-seven-five, right?"

"Oh, stop. I'm not saying . . . I love you for you, babe. I don't want you to —"

"Five-seven-five." I'd taken a few English-lit courses in college. "No sweat. Any monkey could write one."

Milana smeared jam on her toast. "You're insane."

"You want a poem, lady? You'll get one. Tonight. Count on it."

She laughed. "Yeah?"

"Shake on it." I held out my hand. "Honey-baby-lover-friend, it's a deal."

On my break from cleaning sidewalks that morning, I peeled off my sticky gloves, busted out my new ballpoint pen and notepad, and prepared to write. I touched the pen's tip to the paper, eager to let rip.

Nothing happened.

Not a problem, I decided. Inspiration didn't come all at once. I kept the notepad in the back pocket of my work pants for the rest of the day. Every now and then I made ready to compose, my pen poised over paper. "Fat cloud in the sky . . ." Five syllables. A start. It was tricky, because I had an inborn disdain for any type of structure, and the haiku is nothing if not structured. I put the pad back in my pocket.

My co-worker James, a tall, dark-skinned black man in his late thirties, walked ahead of me on the street with his pan and broom. Every now and then he turned and observed me from behind his mirrored sunglasses with a sort of vague anthropological interest. One of his favorite phrases was "White folks crazy." I was doing little to dispel his blanket assessment.

James shook his head in mild reproach, and his out-of-fashion Jheri curls glistened in the sun. All the other black guys on our crew had shaved heads or close-cropped hair. They taunted James, called him "Dripmaster Flash," but James never bothered to respond. He wasn't their friend; he wasn't my friend. He just showed up to do his damn job. He was not there to play the fool. Our boss, a balding white sadist named Mike McCloskey, left him alone. James carried himself tall, even when he was dragging four dripping trash bags across the street.

Meanwhile, now that I had embarked on my new avocation as a poet, Main Street, which I had patrolled blindly for months with a pan and broom, suddenly appeared new and interesting. For once I was really looking at what was going on around me. I saw pigeons strutting Mick Jagger-like on cracked concrete. I saw three winos, gapped-toothed and debonaire, chatting on a junked lavender sofa under a skeletal maple tree. I saw a pink gum blob, melted on the sidewalk skillet, clinging in long, delicate strings to a fast-walking businessman's wingtips. I saw Korean hot-dog vendors playing Chinese checkers on a rickety card table between their steaming grills.

Hell, I owed Steven Trimm an apology. For the first time ever, I was paying attention to the peripheries of my environment.

Twenty minutes into my lunch hour, I looked up from *USA Today* and wrote my first full haiku in a mad rush:

Priest on a blanket
asks the new kid to join him
for a slice of cake

Vaguely disturbing but evocative, I thought. More to the point, this first success opened the floodgate of my creativity. I wrote another, and another. I wrote about pigeons and street people and stray dogs and politicians and political unrest in the Middle East and whatever else was in the paper that day. By 5 P.M. I'd written thirty-one in all.

(end of excerpt)