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## To Honor Impermanence: The Haiku and Other Poems of Gerald Vizenor

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TO HONOR IMPERMANENCE:  
THE HAIKU AND OTHER POEMS OF GERALD VIZENOR

Tom Lynch

*the arrogance of academic discoveries*<sup>1</sup>

Poems on a page bear a decidedly, yet deceptively, fixed being. The Western literary tradition (if I may invoke such a creature) has historically preferred fixed texts. Even when confronting slippery oral traditions, an enormous effort has been expended to canonize an originary Ur-form of each tale. Such a tendency, akin to mounting a bird species rather than pondering the flight of feathers, is the antagonist of Vizenor's poetic art. In what follows I seek to explore some of the ways Vizenor's haiku and longer poetry melt fixation and celebrate the transformative possibilities of impermanence.

—HAIKU

*I think my first important experience as a writer, my most ecstatic experiences, were with poetry.*<sup>2</sup>

*November trees  
Fine lines of delicate twigs:  
The twilight sky.*

When readers discover that Gerald Vizenor writes haiku poetry, they may be reminded of Richard Wright. Both are writers concerned with, if not consumed by, ethnic and racial identity politics and resistance to the multiple manifestations of racist ideologies. In 1959, late in his life, Wright discovered haiku through R. H. Blyth's books and from his death bed composed more than 4,000 of his own. His title for his selected haiku, *This Other World*, suggests the distinction he saw between haiku and the political literature he spent most of his life writing. Though at first glance one might suspect that for Vizenor as well, haiku is an adjunct to, perhaps an escape from, his more serious project of assailing the terminal creeds of manifest destinarian ideologies, such

an assessment would be mistaken. Unlike Wright, Vizenor came to haiku at the start of his literary career. Indeed his experiences in Japan and with haiku were formative in the development of his literary aesthetic and impelled his political consciousness.

Vizenor's academic career is also obliged to haiku, which were responsible for his first academic position: "Professor George Mills hired me to teach at Lake Forest College in Illinois and inaugurated my career as a college teacher in the most unusual manner: haiku poems, not a doctorate, earned the highest honors" (*Interior* 218).

Because Vizenor's current reputation rests so strongly on his status as a theorist and novelist, haiku, a genre that eschews theoretical content, seems peripheral. Given the obscurity of the genre in academic discourse, who would notice his haiku—however excellent—if they constituted his sole output? Yet haiku may be postulated as enacting, rather than discussing, his theoretical positions. Through them one encounters, not the essence, but the presence of Vizenor's imagination. Haiku, slight though they may be, embrace the wide expanse of his concerns:

Haiku thought is intuitive, a manner of meditation at a dreamscape, a clear distance from dense grammatical philosophies and dominant political ideologies. Haiku turns are moments of wonder in the natural world, surprises at the tree-lines near the trail, at the woodland rim; internal transformations through mythic word cinemas, visions and dreams, memories, unusual symmetries, and imaginative relationships between words, birds, fur, water, insect sounds, twists in the snow. Haiku is blue, tactile, musk, tribal, and a dance. (*Matsushima* n.p.)

Haiku imbue Vizenor's theoretical prose and his fiction, no doubt exasperating some critics when a prose essay on a theoretical aspect of tribal identity suddenly cascades imagery across the page.

—JAPAN

*The Japanese and their literature were my liberation.* ("Envoy" 27)

*calm in the storm  
master basho soaks his feet  
water striders*

Sent to Japan as a GI in 1953, Gerald Vizenor escaped transfer to Korea and so had opportunity to encounter Japanese literature. Illustrating the transformative power of that trickster—chance—Vizenor, an urban crossblood Anishinabe, discovered the power of literature, gained access to his own poetic heritage, and found a literary voice in occupied Japan. "How ironic," he says "that my service as a soldier would lead

me to haiku, and haiku an overture to dream songs. Haiku would be my introduction to the pleasures of literature, a national literature that did not exclude the common reader by dominance, decadence, or intellectual elitism" ("Envoy" 26). Encountering haiku in the season of his 18th summer, Vizenor was "liberated from the treacherous manners of missionaries, classic warrants, the themes of savagism and civilization, and the arrogance of academic discoveries" ("Envoy" 26).

In part at least, his haiku are an effort to glean a remembrance bordering nostalgia: "I would regret my decision to leave, and over the years told stories and wrote poems to remember the sound and scent of Japan" (*Interior* 130). His remembrance of those times in Japan exude desire: "Japan was my lover in the mountains" (130). With Aiko Okada, his Japanese lover to whom he later dedicated several of his haiku collections, Vizenor pilgrimaged on the route of the Master Bashô.

Matsuo Bashô visited Matsushima and wrote in his haibun travel diaries about the moon over the pine islands. We were there three hundred years later and remembered the master haiku poet. Aiko told stories and poems and touched the sand creases near shore; we held the water, raised the moon in our hands, wished in silence to hold that night under the pines. Leashed boats turned on their moorage in the bay. We waited in the fresh shadows and then crossed the wooden bridge back to the mainland and the hotel. (*Interior* 145)

His haiku serve in part to "hold that night under the pines." The wish is fulfilled in the imagistic line that follows that phrase: "Leashed boats turned on their moorage in the bay." Calling that image to mind returns him to that delicate evening vigil.

Vizenor was accepted as a student to Sophia University in Tokyo, where he imagined himself studying "Japanese language and literature, tea ceremonies, haiku poetry, the soul of the crane" (his Anishinabe clan totem and an honored being in Japan). At the last moment, however, he rejected the position and returned to the United States, a decision he recalls somewhat wistfully in his autobiography (*Interior* 127).

Vizenor seems to have felt more at home in Japan than Minnesota. On his departure, he "cried and walked for hours to the train depot. I wanted to change my mind," he says, "to stay at home in Japan. I had no home; how ironic that there was no home at the end of my last road home" (*Interior* 149). To honor impermanence in haiku seems an oddly apt trickster gesture for one who found surcease from homelessness in a land not his home.

His desire to recall Japan seems to have grown stronger with time. His earliest collections of haiku have titles that do not explicitly invoke

Japan: *Two Wings the Butterfly* (1962), *Raising the Moon Vines* and *Seventeen Chirps* (1964), *Slight Abrasions: A Dialogue in Haiku*, with Jerome Downes (1966), and *Empty Swings* (1967). But his substantially revised collected haiku from 1984, *Matsushima: Pine Islands*, has a title that explicitly returns us to the Japanese experience that propelled his haiku performances. As his visit to Matsushima, and all that it configures, grows more remote in time, it looms more strongly in imagination: “shamans and other tribal healers and visionaries speak the various languages of plants and animals and feel the special dream power to travel backward from familiar times and places” (*Earthdivers* xvii).

Pondering Vizenor’s haiku in the context of his expressed literary themes, several intertwined topics surface: impermanence and tradition, seasons, *oshki anishinabe*, Zen tricksters, nature, dissolving words, shadows, and attributes of development.

#### —IMPERMANENCE AND TRADITION

*I learned to remember these stories, and to honor impermanence. (Interior 130)*

*sweet bouquet  
abandoned on a park bench  
set upon by bees*

When Vizenor returned to the United States from Japan he entered college and in 1960 again encountered haiku, this time in the University of Minnesota classroom of Professor Edward Copeland, who, Vizenor says, “opened his course on Japanese literature that summer with haiku in translation. The sense of impermanence, he said, is in the weather, the seasons, and in haiku; at the same time, we are aware of culture and tradition” (*Interior* 171). These remembered course notes, with their emphasis on impermanence, encapsulate Vizenor’s haiku aesthetic:

Copeland recited and translated one of the greatest haiku poems by Basho: *furuike ya*, the ancient pond; *kawazu tobikomu*, frog leaps, or jumps; *mizu no oto*, the sound of water, or splash. The poem shows the season, and suggests tradition and impermanence in the most subtle images and motions. (*Interior* 172)

Summarizing the views of Kyorai, one of Bashô’s disciples, Donald Keene explicates this notion of impermanence in more detail: “Bashô insisted that a worthwhile hokku must contain . . . eternal validity and not be a mere flash of wit, but it must also be in tune with the moment and not a fossilized generalization. . . . a hokku had to be at once about the observed moment . . . but also about the eternal element that was momentarily disturbed” (136).

This juxtaposition of permanence and change might also suggest a parallel to the condition of the postindian tribes confronting the dilemma of how to maintain tribal being yet remain alive to the flux of the contemporary world, not “a fossilized generalization” in a colonialist matrix. “The impermanence of natural reason and tribal remembrance,” Vizenor says, “was close to the mood of impermanence in haiku” (“Envoy” 28).

The vicissitudes of Vizenor’s own life (his father’s murder, his mother’s abandonment, his step-father’s death, his passage from home to home) also emphasize—perhaps exaggerate—the wistful tragedies and occasional delights of impermanence. His recollection of Professor Copeland’s description of Issa as one who “celebrated common creatures, the earth as it turns, runs, and blooms, impermanence and human ironies; he was poor, an orphan, and he loved nature” (*Interior* 172) could as well describe himself, and suggests a deeply personal basis for his interest in haiku.

—SEASONS

*The greatest source of experience and inspiration comes from the seasons of Spring and Autumn and the transition and motion of life during these seasons. (Two Wings 6)*

*In the darkness  
Only the scent of Autumn:  
Smouldering leaves.*

Impermanence most manifests itself in the great cycle of the seasons. Traditionally, for some people definitively, though less so in modern times, a haiku poem refers to the seasons, either overtly or through a conventional season word. In the *Spring* volume of R. H. Blyth’s *Haiku* Vizenor would have read that for Bashō the season was the essential component of haiku, not, Blyth contends, simply “as a principle, but as a mode of intuition, a vaster way of seeing particular things. As we look more carefully at the object,” Blyth continues, “we see in it the whole world working out its perfect will. And this comes from the historical, the accumulated experiences of the Japanese race during more than a thousand years” (v). Vizenor identifies a close affinity between this culturally inherited Japanese appreciation for the seasonal cycle and his tribal heirs’ seasonally patterned life.

The *anishinaabe* learned to hear the seasons by natural reason. . . . The first tribal families trailed the shores of *gichigami* to the hardwoods and marshes where they touched the maple trees for *ziizibaakwadaaboo* in the spring,

speared fish on the rivers, and then gathered *manoomin*, wild rice, in the late autumn. Before winter and the cold snow the tribes returned to their communities at *mooningwanekaning* on Madeline Island in Lake Superior. (*Summer 5-6*)

All his haiku books are seasonally organized. In several books each page of haiku also contains the Japanese character for the season. So one reads a poem, then the calligraphic name of the season, then a second haiku. The calligraphy serves more than a decorative function, it endorses the broadest context for the poems, it serves as the cosmic cycle of impermanence of which the image in the poem is a specific case. The season is at both the literal and imaginative center of each page.

An example from *Matsushima*:

sudden rain  
scarecrows share an umbrella  
bingo night



calico kittens  
crowd around a bowl of milk  
garden stones

Perhaps because the seasons, unfixed, energize the flux of life and embody in the largest cosmic sense the power of transformation, “the motion of the seasons,” he says, are among those aspects that constitute “the hermeneutics of trickster stories” (*Summer 10*).

—ZEN TRICKSTER

*Naanabozho . . . is related to the wind, and his brother is a stone. (Interior 129)*

*The cool breeze  
Bends the whiskers of the cat  
Napping in the window.*

Kimberly Blaeser suggests that “many of Vizenor’s haiku . . . readily exhibit a connection to the trickster tradition in Native American literature” (345). One might postulate various reasons for this link. For one, haiku, at least those in the Zen tradition, like the trickster, seek to delace the shrouds of what Vizenor calls “terminal creeds,” or fixed categories of thought. The outlooks of both Zen and the trickster avoid dualities. Vizenor notes that “the images in a haiku are not reduced to structural polarities, the opposites are dissolved in words” (*Matsushima* n.p.).

Toward this end, both outlooks cherish intuition. Haiku poet and theorist Eric Amann says “a haiku is said to resemble the ‘koan’ in Zen teaching, inasmuch as it makes use of paradox, ‘unresolved tension’ and the juxtaposition of apparently unrelated images, forcing the reader into an intuitive rather than an intellectual perception of reality” (33). Such could as well be said of the trickster’s service. Indeed Vizenor refers to Paul Repp’s book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* as “a collection of trickster and meditation stories” (*Matsushima* n.p.).

—OSHKI ANISHINABE

*The oshki anishinabe writer is a visual thinker. (Everlasting 69)*

*With the moon  
My young father comes to mind  
Walking the clouds.*

This poem, a bit mystical by haiku conventions, is more kin to Anishinabe dream songs and links Vizenor’s immediate vision of the moon with his memory of his long-deceased father, his connection to his Anishinabe heritage. Vizenor’s sense of the poetics of what he terms the *oshki anishinabe* (new Chippewa) writer could also serve as a definition of the haiku writer. When discussing Ted Mahto he states that “the *oshki anishinabe* writer is a visual thinker soaring on the rhythms of the woodland past through the gestures of the present” (*Everlasting* 69). This poetics is possible because “the *anishinabe* language of the past was a language of verbal forms and word images. The spoken feeling of the language—and thought processes—is a moving image of tribal woodland life. The visual images are not static or inferred from logic” (*Everlasting* 75).

Vizenor believes that a “mythic parallel” exists “between haiku and dream songs. . . . fundamental to both forms” is an “intensity of imagery and the idea of comparisons—the kind of mythic transformations, comparisons between human behavior, and comparisons in life without a superior relationship to it” (“An Interview” 42). According to Kimberly

Blaeser, Vizenor's haiku "seeks to combine the traditions of the Ojibway dream song and the Japanese haiku" (344). It may be useful to recall here that haiku poetry stem from and seek to reinvolve a moment of intense insight, what the Haiku Society of America calls "the essence of a moment keenly perceived, in which Nature is linked to human nature" (82). As Blaeser says, "the Ojibway dream songs also stem from a moment of intense personal awareness which, as the name indicates, may have come during a dream or visionary experience" (346). For Vizenor, she says, haiku and dream songs "intend to surpass or forgo the goals of any philosophy of literary esthetics for the sake of actual experience, for a moment of enlightenment" (349). Extending the parallel further, Blaeser suggests that "both haiku and dream songs also seek not merely to give voice to this visionary experience, but also, acting as stimuli, to assist the reader or listener in the attainment of a similar moment of spiritual awareness or illumination" (350). As Blyth says, haiku "are for you to use in your own poetic experience. You are not to be a mere observer of literature, but to play your part in its dynamic re-creation" (v). Several places in *Earthdivers*, a work concerned with the idea of creation and re-creation, Vizenor echoes Blyth by claiming that "creation takes place . . . between tellers and listeners" (*Earthdivers* 26). "Creation myths are not time bound, the creation takes place in the telling" (*Earthdivers* xii). In this sense, creation myths are like haiku, in which the events in the poem recur in the act of their telling. Each haiku is, in a very real sense then, a microcosmic creation myth calling into new being the events reinscribed through the telling. The creation of both the poem, and the events enacted in the poem, take place in the telling.

—NATURE

*moments of wonder in the natural world. (Matsushima n.p.)*

*thunder clouds  
leech lake applauds at the dock  
crows mark the poplars*

Haiku are first, foremost, and fundamentally a poetry of nature. Even those poets who choose to write haiku about exclusively human topics generally justify this decision by arguing that moments of human existence are also subsets of nature (Willmot 211-25). This riveted concentration on the natural world, this acknowledgment of the validity, the ontological equivalence, of even the tiniest and seemingly most innocuous of creatures as the focus of important poetic art, draws another affinity between haiku and Anishinabe poetry.

While haiku is usually seen in the context of Buddhism, R. H. Blyth discusses the influence of Shinto in a way that suggests some parallels with Anishinabe culture. Blyth declares that the essence of “non-political Shinto” is “animism, the belief in indwelling spirits, together with animatism, or simple nature worship” (158). Though A. Irving Hallowell suggests that the Anishinabe are not entirely animistic, the possibility for animism exists. Indeed in Ojibwa grammar, he concludes “stones are grammatically animate” (24). Vizenor retells in *Earthdivers* how Hallowell “once asked an old *anishinaabe* man about the animation of stones: ‘Are *all* the stones we see about us alive?’ He reflected for a long while and then replied, ‘No! But *some* are.’” (xvii). One needn’t propose any great similarity between Shinto and Anishinabe belief to see a basic compatibility on this issue. Vizenor quotes the neglected genius Lafcadio Hearn, to indicate the connective possibilities. Hearn, he says, though “born Irish and Greek”

became Japanese, and he could have become Anishinaabe; we were brothers with the trees and stones. “Until you can feel, and keenly feel, that stones have character, that stones have tones and values, the whole artistic meaning of a Japanese garden cannot be revealed to you.” Naanabozho, the Anishinaabe earthdiver and tribal trickster, is related to the wind, and his brother is a stone. (*Interior* 129)

Both haiku and tribal literatures take the tiniest of creatures seriously for their own sake, not for what, like Shakespeare’s lark arising or Burns’s “Wee, sleekit, cow’rin, tim’rous beastie,” they might be made to symbolize of the human condition. Like Issa’s haiku, Vizenor’s abound in the doings of the tiniest creatures:

Issa

Fleas of my hut,—  
I’m sorry for them;  
They become emaciated soon enough  
(Trans. Blyth)

Do not kill the fly!  
See how it wrings its hands  
Its feet!  
(Trans. Blyth)

Vizenor

Harried mosquito  
I am not the last of my kind  
Ticking my neck.

breakfast  
flies first at the table  
rural habits

## —DISSOLVING WORDS

*Not ersatz existence, but the sentiments of natural experiences when words dissolve. (Matsushima n.p.)*

*april ice storm  
new leaves freeze overnight  
words fall apart*

In the preface to *Earthdivers* Vizenor quotes Karsten Harries that “there are moments when the inadequacy of our language seizes us, when language seems to fall apart and falling apart opens us to what transcends it. . . . As language falls apart, contact with being is reestablished . . .” (xvi). Haiku has been called “the wordless poem,” and according to haiku poet and theorist Rod Willmot, “haiku’s special characteristic as a form of literature is to seem not to be literature. In different terms: a haiku has ‘presentational immediacy,’ setting objects and events right before us without words getting in the way. At least, that is the illusion—an illusion created by words and our expectations about them” (Willmot 211).

This illusion is a paradox. In most literature the word signifies an external object, and that object in turn signifies symbolically some transcendent meaning. The words “old pond” on a page evoke the image of a pond, and that pond must, if we are to value the poem, we think, stand for something else, some significant meaning. In haiku, this is a mistake. If a Japanese haiku seems a meaningless image to a Western reader, it is not because that reader lacks familiarity with Japanese culture and so misses the symbolic significance, it is because the haiku is indeed, perversely, meaningless. Haiku seek to slide back down the chain of signifiers, eliminating the final stage and, by eschewing most literary tropes, creating an illusion that it has evaded the first stage of signification. As Eric Amann puts it,

The problem for the Western reader . . . is not to find the hidden meaning, the “symbolic significance” of a haiku, for there is none, but to re-convert the images of a haiku into his own intuitions. And the answer to that lies in the art of reading haiku. A haiku is not meant to be read like a longer poem. It is more of an object for contemplation. First we must empty our minds of all pre-conceived ideas and re-experience what the poet saw or heard or felt. (Amann 3)

Vizenor concurs: “The reader creates a dreamscape from haiku; nothing remains in print, words become dream voices, traces on the wind, twists in the snow, a perch high in the bare poplar” (*Matsushima n.p.*). In the

dreamscape of the imagination, the words “become” these things. Conversely, he continues, “Deconstruct the printed words in a haiku and there is nothing; nothing is in a haiku, not even a poem. The *nothing* in a haiku is not an aesthetic void; rather, it is a moment of enlightenment, a dreamscape where the words dissolve.” For haiku provoke “not ersatz existence, but the sentiments of natural experiences when words dissolve” (*Matsushima* n.p.).

As an introduction to his book *Eating a Melon*, haiku poet Bob Boldman retells a Zen parable that further elaborates on this idea:

Ken-O and his disciple Menzan were eating a melon together. Suddenly the master asked, “Tell me, where does all this sweetness come from?”

“Why,” Menzan quickly swallowed and answered, “it’s a product of cause and effect.”

“Bah!, That’s cold logic!”

“Well,” Menzan said, “from where then?”

“From the very ‘where’ itself, that’s where.” (n.p.)

The Zen trickster Ken-O’s “very ‘where’ itself” dissipates language and is an ally of Vizenor’s shadow, the Anishinaabe “*agawatese*.”

—SHADOWS

*The shadows are the prenarrative silence that inherits the words. (Manifest 14)*

*Even my shadow  
Moves as I do in the moon  
Listless October.*

One of the most common words in Vizenor’s critical vocabulary is “shadow.” When the words dissolve, only their shadows remain. In the essay “Shadow Survivance” he argues that

the shadows are the silence in heard stories, the silence that bears a referent of tribal memories and experience. The shadow words are active memories, and the memories of heard stories. . . . The word *agawaatese* is heard in the oral stories of the *anishinaabe*, the tribal people of the northern woodland lakes. The word hears silence and shadows, and could mean a shadow, or casts a shadow. The sense of *agawaatese* is that the shadows are animate entities. (*Manifest* 72-73)

He relates the concept of shadow explicitly to haiku in which the dissolved word is replaced with a shadow in the evoked sensation. “The

haiku poem, for instance, ascribes the seasons with shadow words.” Vizenor goes on to quote Blyth: “‘Haiku is the result of the wish, the effort, not to speak, not to write poetry, not to obscure further the truth and suchness of a thing with words, with thoughts and feelings,’ wrote R. H. Blyth in *Haiku*” (65). Though quiet, haiku is sensational in that its design is to evoke a sensory experience. The shadow inheres in the sensation that precedes and postcedes language.

—ATTRIBUTES OF DEVELOPMENT

*The notion, in the literature of dominance, that the oral advances to the written, is a colonial reduction of natural sound, heard stories, and the tease of shadows in tribal remembrance. (Manifest 72)*

*november storm  
hearts painted on the bridge  
crossed out*

Vizenor constantly revises his haiku. The flux of the poems seeks to avoid what we might call the “terminal poem” syndrome. Since each republication involves a reenactment, there are no scriptural versions of his haiku. Vizenor himself identifies three levels of variation or what he calls “attributes of development” (“Envoy” 30). The haiku in his first books, he says, “were common comparative experiences in the past tense.” In *Matsushima*, however, the haiku “were more metaphorical, concise and with a sense of presence” (“Envoy” 30). A comparison of a poem originally published in *Empty Swings* and recomposed for *Matsushima* indicates some of the changes:

Like silver buttons  
The moon comes through his shirt  
Threadbare scarecrow.

october moonrise  
scarecrow in a threadbare shirt  
silver buttons

Haiku juxtapose image components, but the logic of a simile constrains response. In this revision Vizenor has taken the silver buttons out of the realm of the imagined simile and stitched them onto the scarecrow’s shirt, allowing for a more suggestive and intuitive reading.

In his recent revisions he has also exchanged the past tense for the present, an alteration foregrounding his notion that “creation takes place

in the telling, in present-tense metaphors" (*Earthdivers* xii). The change also gives the poems a greater sense of immediacy, as the following pairs indicate. The first in each pair is from *Seventeen Chirps* and the revised versions are from *Matsushima*:

The charcoal  
Stored all summer in the shed  
Smelled of urine.

birch wood  
stacked all summer in the shed  
scent of urine

The red bucket  
Frozen under the rain spout  
Began to leak.

wooden buckets  
frozen under the rain spouts  
springs a fast leak

To suggest, however, that the changes have always been improvement may be to commit the folly of canonizing a scriptural version in direct contradiction to Vizenor's desire to avoid such fixing. Perhaps it is better to see the various manifestations of the poems as akin to the seasonal flux. This spring is not an improvement on the last one, and a more recent version of a poem is not necessarily an improvement on a previous one—though the momentum to interpret it as such is strong.

His most recent revisions add what he terms an "envoy"

a prose concentration and discourse on the images and sensations. This practice combines my experience in haiku with natural reason in tribal literature, a new haiku hermeneutics. Tribal dream songs and haiku are concentrated in nature. For instance, the haiku poems that follow have an envoy, or a discourse on the reach of haiku sensations and tribal survivance. The envoy is interpretative; the three lines of the haiku are heard in shadow words and printed without punctuation. The envoy is in prose. ("Envoy" 30-31)

In the following he takes a poem from *Matsushima* and adds a discussion:

those stubborn flies  
square dance across the grapefruit  
honor your partner

Fat green flies dance on the backs of spoons, turn twice, and reach for the grapefruit. The flies *allemande* left and right in a great breakfast dance, but the owners of the spoons in the restaurant would terminate the insects to save the grapefruit. We are the lonesome dancers over the remains of so many natural partners in the world. ("Envoy" 31)

This practice of mixing prose and haiku has an honored history in Japan as a genre loosely referred to in English as *haibun*. Usually, however, *haibun* mingles haiku with either a descriptive travel journal, such as Bashō's *Oku no Hosomichi* (*The Narrow Road to the North*) or with a diary, such as Issa's *Oraga Haru* (*The Year of My Life*). In both cases, the prose provides a context for the haiku, but not, as in Vizenor's "envoys," an explicit analysis. Given the frustrations a haiku poet in America may experience with the limited ability of his audience to appreciate his art, Vizenor's desire to explicate is certainly understandable. But it also engenders a possible authorial interpretive hegemony, alien to the haiku spirit, which grants far more sovereignty to the reader. Even if, as Vizenor contends, "the interpretations of the heard and written must consider the shadow words and sensations of haiku," and even if "the envoys to haiku are the silent interpretations of a 'haiku spirit'" ("Envoy" 32), these envoys are nevertheless authorial interventions into the reader's experience of the image. Blaeser praises "the open text of Vizenor's haiku," which, she says, "generally works through images of the natural world. . . . In his poetry, he employs natural images but refrains from dictating connections or meaning. Instead, he holds faith with the visual imagination of the reader" (354). One seems compelled to ask, though, whether the addition of an envoy implies a retreat from this faith.

This question has arisen elsewhere in considerations of Vizenor's work. Discussing the film *Harold of Orange*, Robert Silberman has pondered this tendency in Vizenor's work:

In the movie, as, at times, in the introduction to his books . . . we can see Vizenor struggling to explain what he is doing and, because he is taking an essentially romantic view of the imagination as sacred and beyond rationalism, attacking the notion of explanation. There is a tension underlying Vizenor's double role as the self-conscious and self-critical individual who writes introductions [and envoys] "explaining" to the audience, a gesture of guidance and aid, and as the artist who then turns around and attacks explanations. (11)

The envoys to haiku may suggest an attempt on Vizenor's part to write a more elaborated form of haiku as an alternative to the longer poetry he composed earlier in his career.

## —LONGER POEMS

*I have never overcome my wearisome want to raise the word from the page, to sound out the passion and the sacrifices of literature in the voice of the crane. (Interior 144)*

*grandchildren following  
clumsy and clover stained  
tasting the rain  
singing  
the world will change*

Though longer poetry was important earlier in his career, in recent years Vizenor seems to consider it less so. In a 1981 interview Vizenor asserts that “I think my first important experience as a writer, my most ecstatic experiences, were with poetry.” He then admits, however, to the declining importance of the longer poems: “I’m not sure now; except for haiku I’m much more moved by longer prose pieces” (“Interview” 43). He has never published a collection of his longer poetry, but many can be found in anthologies, most extensively in *Voices of the Rainbow: Contemporary Poetry by Native Americans* and *The Harper’s Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry*.

His first serious poems were written in Japan. “The Balcony,” which he calls “one of my earliest poems” was written for Aiko Okada (*Interior* 140). The poem is mainly a sequence of three-line imagistic stanzas, such as “Where the summer sun/Bakes and bleaches the stone,/Where the birds land, rest and sing.” The dependence on imagery and the mood of pleasant melancholy show the influence of haiku and Japanese poetics. The poem is organized through a process of incremental parallelism, a design he will use frequently in his later poetry.

His later poems are similarly imagistic, but much more emotionally intense, a sort of extended haiku often transforming under the pressure of the post-colonial condition into a surrealistic expression of agony. The innocent image, brayed in the mortar of manifest destiny, excretes a tragicomic unction. For example, the poem “White Earth,” subtitled “Images and Agonies,” (a subtitle that could apply to many of his poems) opens with a seasonally explicit haiku-like image: “late october sun/breaks over the cottonwoods.” One could almost expect a third line to complete this poem as a haiku, but instead the poem transforms with the slinking arrival of the trickster:

*tricksters  
roam the rearview mirrors  
government sloughs*

The view in the rearview mirror, a compressed historical angle of vision, provides the perspective for the remainder of the poem. Grim, the poem is not entirely bleak. Though “beaded crucifixion/double over in the reeds,” nevertheless somehow “shamans at the centerfolds/pave the roads/publish their poems.” And although “fiscal storms/close the last survival school,” we discover that “animals at the treelines/send back the hats and rusted traps” and might be reminded of the fur trade and imagine the beavers returning the beaver hats and rusted traps of their agony.

A similar but more personal, perhaps less overtly politicized poem, is “March in North Dakota”:

the whole moon  
burns behind jamestown

seven wings of geese  
light the thin ice

asian sun  
bleeds on the interstate

pressed flowers  
tremble in the prairie stubble

paced on the mirror  
my fingerprints blot the past

In this poem we are again traveling the highways of the northern plains, this time explicitly near Jamestown, North Dakota (though the name Jamestown might also prick a recollection of the early colonial village). The poem moves through a sequence of imagistic moments until the poet’s fingers step across the rearview mirror to obscure the past. Bathed in prairie light, with the full moon rising on one side and the sun’s glow burning on the other, the flowers tremble, and in flight across North Dakota the poet seeks to evade personal and/or cultural history.

A poem that explicitly shows the connection between his haiku and his longer poems, as well as the way his images exude a complicated political stance, is “Shaman Breaks”

1  
colonists  
unearth their wealth

and tease  
the old stone man  
over the breaks

moths batter  
the cold windows  
their light  
is not our day

leaves abide the seasons  
the last crows  
smarten the poplars

2  
tourists  
discover their ruins  
and mimic  
the old stone woman  
over the breaks

nasturtiums  
dress the barbed wire  
fences down  
to the wild sea

magnolias  
bloom under a whole moon  
words fall apart

3  
soldiers  
bleach the landscapes  
hound the shamans

wild stories  
break from the stones

This poem echoes numerous lines and other poems of Vizenor's in one of the more overt gestures of self-referential intertextuality to be found in his work. For example, the lines "their light/is not our day" in the middle stanza of section 1 recall the lines from "Tyranny of Moths" "tonight the moths/go stitching with their kind/up and down the net/they may never know/my light is not my day." The second stanza of

section 2 repeats almost verbatim a haiku from *Matsushima*: “bold nasturtiums/dress the barbed wire fences/down to the wild sea,” as well as a phrase from *Interior Landscapes*: “Remembrance is a natural current that beats and breaks with the spring tides; the curious imagine a sensual undine on the wash, as the nasturtiums dress the barbed wire fences down to the wild sea” (*Interior* 263). And the third stanza, essentially a haiku, repeats a line from another haiku in *Matsushima*, “april ice storm/new leaves freeze over-night/words fall apart.”

Each section begins with a different representative of the colonial enterprise: colonists, tourists, soldiers. The first two sections are structurally identical. While in the first section the “colonists/unearth their wealth,” in the second section the “tourists/discover their ruins.” And while the colonists of the first section then “tease/the old stone man/over the breaks,” the tourists in section 2 “mimic/the old stone woman/over their breaks.”

Though each stanza begins with a colonial master, each also expresses a transcendence of that condition. The colonists’ stanza opens out into moths (perhaps images of transformation?) and concludes with leaves and crows in the poplars. The tourists’ stanza is transformed as the nasturtiums dress the colonial barbed wire fence and the magnolias beneath the moon supersede language. And finally in the soldiers’ stanza, though the soldiers bleach the landscape and hound the shamans, wild stories still manage to break from the stones—the brothers of Nanabozho. In their various transformations, the elements of nature in the turn of the seasons escape the strictures of colonial dominance.

A less hopeful poem, perhaps tragic-romantic, but among his best, is “Indians at the Guthrie.” Presenting a tapestry of cultural and personal loss, the poem ties performances of terminal representations with both historic and contemporary genocide. The opening stanza presents damaged urban Indians outside a theater:

limping past the guthrie theater  
wounded indian  
saluting with the wrong hand

This external scene contrasts with the next stanza, which portrays those inside the theater as a sort of white royalty erecting the stage props for a performance of manifest destiny:

blond children in purple tapestries  
building castles  
barricades on stage with reservation plans

The poem then leaps into history, recalling the massacre of Cheyenne in 1864 and, so many years earlier, of the Pequots, “the first of the New England tribes to sense the genocidal intentions of the English” (Drinnon 43-44):

rehearsing overscream from sand creek  
five hundred dead on the mystic river stage

The theatrical tropes of “rehearsing” and “stage” link these literal massacres with the colonialist performance in the theater. In his essay “Sand Creek Survivors” Vizenor connects the Sand Creek massacre with the suicide by hanging of thirteen-year-old Dane Michael White. Dane had been imprisoned for forty-one days, mostly in isolation, for truancy. Vizenor’s essay is a prose meditation and gloss on the poem, made more obvious in a stanza that recounts contemporary versions of massacre:

once more at wounded knee  
sniffing glue in gallop  
sterno in bemidji  
cultural suicides downtown on the reservation

The urban reservation provides no escape from the relentless pursuit of the cavalry. The concluding stanza explicitly links “acts” inside the theater with actions in the outside world:

when the theater acts are over  
the players mount up for new parties in the hills

The pun on “acts” reveals the bond between colonialist portrayal and genocidal behavior.

Like his haiku, Vizenor’s longer poems change with each published incarnation. A notable example of this is the poem about his father published as “Family Photograph” in *Voices of the Rainbow* and as “The Last Photograph” in *Interior Landscapes*, where it appears in the context of a discussion of his father’s murder. The two poems contain few exact lines in common, yet they match up almost precisely stanza for stanza. The motifs in each stanza are the same, but the language varies, just as a story in the oral tradition varies with each telling yet maintains a comparable sequence of events: “It’s pretty obvious in my work,” he says, “that stories are not static; there are no scriptural versions of oral traditional stories. There are great variations” (Coltelli 164). The first few stanzas illustrate the effect:

## FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH

among trees  
 my father was a spruce

corded for tribal pulp  
 he left the white earth reservation  
 colonial genealogies  
 taking up the city at twenty-three

telling stories  
 sharing dreams from a mason jar  
 running  
 low through the stumps at night  
 was his line

## THE LAST PHOTOGRAPH

clement vizenor would be a spruce  
 on his wise return to the trees

corded on the reservation side  
 he overturned the line  
 colonial genealogies  
 white earth remembrance  
 removed to the cities at twenty three

my father lived on stories  
 over the rough rims on mason jars  
 danced with the wounded shaman  
 low over the stumps on the fourth of july

This matching pattern continues with little variation throughout the two poems. "Family Photograph" is more condensed than "The Last Photograph," but we would be hard pressed to say if one version were superior to the other.

Like much of his work, these poems echo images from other works; most notably in this case the image of tree stumps recalls his poem "Tribal Stumps," which concludes with the lines "my father returns/with all the mixed bloods/tribal stumps/from the blood-soaked beams of the city." On initial reading, this stump imagery suggests the vestiges of living beings, the wounds to once vital forces. On the other hand, however, the stump may be just another trickster disguise. For example, we read in Christopher Vecsey's structural consideration of Ojibwa creation myths that "Nanabozho's power as a shaman was particularly illustrated by his ability to transform himself and appear in various disguises, most particularly by his transformation into a stump" (83).

Such transformations provide a fluid key to Vizenor's art. Fixity is the impress of the tragic-colonial enterprise. Flux is the comic-compassionate trickster's habitation. Whether altering his longer poems with each publication, revising his haiku through the moods of the years, or celebrating the turn of the seasons, Vizenor maintains his desire to dismember terminal creeds, to remember the chances of change, and, as he says, to "honor impermanence."

Notes

1. Gerald Vizenor, "Envoy to Haiku," *Shadow Distance: A Gerald Vizenor Reader*, ed. A. Robert Lee (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP, 1994), 27.
2. Gerald Vizenor, "An Interview with Gerald Vizenor," interview by Neal Bowers and Charles L. P. Silet in *MELUS* 8.1 (1981): 43.

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