
THE O:JA&L 2024 CHAPBOOK SERIES
A Writer's Portfolio

PAREIDOLIA

Haibun



PARESH TIWARI

BUTTONHOOK PRESS

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Publishing since 2017 as OPEN: *Journal of Arts & Letters* (O:JA&L) and its imprints Buttonhook Press, HOT BUTTON PRESS
Contemporary Issues, and HIGH BUTTON PRESS *Contemporary Art*,
OAI supports writers and artists worldwide.



Buttonhook Press

An imprint of OPEN: *Journal of Arts & Letters* (O:JA&L)

Set in Garamond and GARAMOND ALLCAPS and formatted in CreateSpace.

Made available online and/or printed by license in the USA and/or elsewhere as a novelty and commemorative document
celebrating the publication of Pareshtiwari's chapbook.

Cover Image: *Complex-Simple* by Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). Oil on Canvas. 100 x 81 cm. 1939. [Public domain.](#)

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OTHER TITLES FROM PARESH TIWARI:

NOW A POEM, NOW A FOREST

THE SHAPE OF A POEM

RED RIVER BOOK OF HAIBUN

RAINDROPS CHASING RAINDROPS

AN INCH OF SKY

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A SHUNT IN MY EYES

Mother once bore a hole into her arm. Digging deeper and deeper with a sewing needle. A mangy dog gnawing at her paw. Single-minded. Purposeful. Maybe even enjoying the pain. She would watch beads of blood boil up to the surface of her dark skin. And then dig in a little more.

I do not blame her for it. I don't even blame her for tipping back the bottle of phenyl.

table scraps
the cloying scent of
leftover dreams

There are memories of a seven-legged curve tailed scorpion, of firecrackers in the crook of a pup's hind-legs, lanky *paan*-chewing boys leaning on drunken lampposts, their trouser zips pulled down. Recluses, snake-charmers, puppeteers, fallen chessmen.

Seven years later, she now screams in her sleep every night. And I must smother my ears with pillows. For her, every day is a nightmare. Of hoarse voices calling out to deaf and mute gods. Of the sun soaking over scabbed wounds and arsenic poisoning her blood.

I do not blame her for clawing the walls that connect our rooms. Or for pulling out her hair in clumps and zip locking them in the freezer.

Yesterday she served them on a warmed-up glass plate.

spearred
to the nib of my pen
a daub of darkness

Mother once bore a hole into her arm. And I carry it, a legacy on my own.

CARTOGRAPHY

At thirteen, she understands how rivers are born. Spends the night clutching a bedsheet between her legs. When the fertile clay of her body breaks open, an ill-fitting bra is thrust her way. Spends weeks praying the breasts would go away.

A continent sprawling over a stretch of unbroken ocean, claimed by many, she knows she has to learn about borders and boundaries.

There's a peace treaty on the cut of her hair
follow the mountain ridge of shoulder blades

An armistice over the length of her skirt
cover the forest growing out of your ankles

A ceasefire over the neckline of her blouse
the school bag will soldier your bosom on bus rides

The shape of her claim changes with time. Sometimes, she mourns the surrender of her voice.

At sixteen, she learns to travel. Her fingers walk for miles over the unfamiliar trails of her own body. Spends the night strangling a strain of desire.

THE ANATOMY OF VIOLENCE

I unlatch the door and step inside to the heavy wag of a black tail. I stroke the now rough hair of the old dog, take a ear in my hand, fold it over, and run my fingers across his muzzle. He closes his eyes and leans into my hand. I can feel the weight of his head as I hold it up so I can blow over his damp nose. All part of the dance we taught each other long ago.

There's a pistol in the pocket of my coat. I pull it out and raise it to the dog's long brow now peppered with the grey of time and place it between his sad eyes. The dog is impervious to the terror of cold steel.

He continues to wag his tail. Thump. Thump. Thump.

*protests
the taste of blood
in my mouth*

BLACK HOLE SANS METAPHOR

The cover page of my poetry notebook is an event horizon. It draws me in one abandoned poem at a time. Slowly sucking the marrow of my pen. My fingers don't hold. Engulfed into the pages curving upon themselves. Words burn out in a blaze. Feeding on ink clots. On verbs masquerading as nouns. Swallowing the breath that fuels them. Time swirls around in waves. An infinite ouroboros.

All my life I've held poems-to-be
on my tongue, carefully straightening
out their creases, tasting their salt.
Now I weigh their light in shades

of red. Sangria is the colour of a haiku
I wrote and scratched out last night.
It smoulders along with the cormorants
and terns settled over an enjambed third line.

There's so much I recognise here. Things that I know intimately by touch sight
taste sound smell. All hurtling towards singularity with me.

MIRRORED

W edged between the warm darkness of the theatre and the Technicolor splashes of the images, you rewrite the opening scenes of the movie.

It's the unravelling of a late winter dawn. The unveiling of a Sanskrit *shloka*. The undoing of Ghalib's last *ghazal*. In that moment, you are the mother and the hooker. Your lips parting the night along its seams. The lover and the deity. Your kohl-rimmed eyes painting fractured dreams. In that nothingness, you are Tolstoy's Anna. Van Gogh's Sien. Beethoven's beloved.

The arch of your neck carves the thinness of ether.

On the undulating expanse of your face, a grizzled mountain romances the first snowflake. In the runes of your crow's feet, the stretch of an ocean unchecked washes over.

Somewhere in the middle of the movie, I hear you say, '*But wasn't he supposed to love her?*'

And I wonder if we know love and its sixty-four shades, its shadows, and its wet-weary-slippery glimmer. In the warm darkness of the movie theatre, I watch a story unfold in your eyes and hurtle towards its origami conflicts.

*jigsaw moon
the way your body
spoons mine*

JOURNEYS

For Atharva

You read tree leaves more intently than the books I buy for you. You decipher their gentle tremble. The way they sip the molten sun. Speak to the wind in ciphers.

*thunderclap —
a delicate fist tightens
around a dream*

I don't know how to handle a life this tender.

Soon your fingers will begin to caress a piano. Your lunar eyes will flood with the song of birds. Soon you will loop shoelaces into bunny ears.

One day you will pick up a crayon. And somewhere in the middle of an empty page, a long stretch of green will begin to kiss the horizon. There will be a yellow house and the silhouette of a solitary man walking by on a serpentine road.

Do you know where this road takes him?

THE SALT OF THINGS

You come back an ocean. Vast. Unpredictable. Blue. Four boats unmoored over your chest. You come back holding silence in your ears, - the way sky holds its grey. A primordial roar cradled within the conch shell.

Your feet now end in beaches. White. Boundless. Meeting the horizon of your stoic journey. Each finger is now a coral. Growing an inch every decade.

In those in-between years, I spoke about you as if you were still here. Like I still needed to worry about the cut of bread in your lunch box. Now that you are back, I seek the cleft of your chin. Bleached for eons under the unrelenting sun. Your skin is salt and wetness and sand. Crab holes breathing constellations. Your hair is shoal colonised by angelfish. They dart out when the moon is half. When the night has only just begun.

This moon was once an accomplice. The easy melody of a lullaby.

*dragonflies —
the way we skitter
around topics*

You come back and your eyes are islands. Floating over the sweep of clear blue. Untouched. Wild. Distant. And I wonder which boat will ferry me back to you.

*ellipses . . .
measuring the stillness
of every pause*

A CLICHÉD LOVE POEM

There are only so many ways to love someone.
There are only so many ways to write a love poem.

Sometimes you love someone like a book. It's the kind that breaks the spine, soils the pages, scribbles in the margins, between the lines (altering forever the voice Anne Shirley spoke in).

a year on

You could even love someone like a house. The walls are of your own making. So are the windows and the doors. But it's the sagging cane chair in the balcony - soaking up the rain - that you really want.

your letter falls

At others, you may love them like a fruit. Peeling off the skin, pulling the rind apart. Hungry mouth on flesh, spitting out the bruise, sticky sweet juices now a rill down the clasp of your palm.

apart

I have known a love that resembles a tree. A *Peepal* tree, if details are essential. It grows in a crack of the ruins, widening into a chasm. The heart-shaped leaves so benign you wouldn't know they want the sun all to themselves.

at the creases

And then you love someone like a bird. A tiny heart beating in tandem with the pulsating blood in your fingers. Do you squeeze them together? Tighter. Just for a moment.

of my palm

SCORCHED

A crow tears at the carcass of a cow. Now dead three days.

The earth bakes ochre. Parts its lips.

Sun, a burning charcoal, slithers down the throat of wind.

His eyes are barren fields. A pale shade of despair. The sky that they search a cauldron of emptiness streaked with impotent clouds. Come tomorrow the farmer would weave these clouds into a rope. Sallow as his bones.

And hang from the dead tree by the dead well.

*Evening meal
the rice-pot fills up
with rain*

THE POET NAVIGATES BY STARS

There's an uncharted lighthouse in her overnighter.

The red-white tower, an ancient, speckled rock on which it stands, and the waves crashing over them in a resolute rhythm. All folded neatly and Tetrised into the bag. And then there's the old seagull nesting in her hair. She never really talks about it. Even with lovers lined up in the deserted streets of her SHEHR-É-BACHPAN. But behind the closed doors of her first home, she sets it free.

The bird takes wing. Gliding by the walls that remember the touch of nine-year-old fingers, before coming to rest on a drop of ink punctuating the sunset.

She plants the lighthouse outside one of the windows, unscrews the cap of her pen and rows. The desk sets sail over the skin of night. The poet navigates by stars.

A gentle breeze follows her around, alights on her knuckles. She takes a sip of the sky and waltzes with an octopus. One of its eight arms on the small of her back. Forward-side-together. Backward-side-together. A whale calf circles the song spilling from her lips. Each swish of its tailfin a prophecy unfulfilled.

this living

*this dying
of a poem*

the wingspan

As the sun begins to light up the horizon, she drops anchor and gives in to sleep. Her warm flesh one with the battered desk. The desk, now half a continent away from the promised land.

READING POETRY AT A CAFÉ

It has been raining flowers all night long.

This should have been a poem in itself. Only it isn't, for they are everywhere now. These pearl-pale petals. On the wet tarmac, the metallic roofs of cars, and under the sticky rubber of wiper blades. Even the brick-lined drain that curves along the road is full of them.

There's one on the toe of my left shoe. And I cannot bring myself to peel it away.

*morning after –
the beginnings of a poem
in a sugar sachet*

Sometimes, I look up from the book – Mary Oliver's BLUE HORSES – arrested by her lack of frivolities and notice the swollen breath of the coffee machine.

The light from the window slants over the barista's hand, turning his fluid movements into a shadow dance. He etches a latte froth with heart. Another one with a leaf.

An old man in the corner watches the ocean framed in a two-by-three glass. A couple on the centre-table sits in silence; which could be heavy or comfortable, depending largely on how you spent your day before coming here.

And you at the far end, your back pressed against the wall. I notice you keep stealing glances at the petal making love to my left shoe.

*almost night . . .
a stray curled around
its shadow*

THE PERFUMER

The carrier oil is a mix of petrichor and the paper boat you sailed as a child.

The base notes are elusive though - a sprinkling of ocean and a pinch of corals. There is a hint of moss from the village pond and frost from your yellow hiking boots. A passing whiff of the clouds where your kite soared and the rocks you turned to sand under your toes. I also pull out a maple leaf from your battered copy of Chiyo-Ni.

The top notes of loss and those of healing are nowhere to be found. How does one capture the scent of breakage and those of struggle, courage, heat and wetness? A thimbleful of shadows, three drops of the moon and a dollop of early dawn. I bruise a lullaby between my fingers, swirl it all in a crystal vial and take a whiff.

It's not you. Not quite yet.

So, I set a haiku alight and pass the vial over it in concentric circles.

almost us
the drydown of possibilities

LOSING THE RIVER TO A LAKE

I made a sketch of you on the last page of my diary. It is a pen and ink scribble. Some would say it never really captured your spirit, and now it's weeping into the pages, blotting away on the edges. Budding into tiny birds that will fly away come morning. The birds are free. They spread over the sky. One wing at a time. Blanketing the cobalt with your scent. Soon the pages would have all been inked in your likeness.

By tomorrow, SANGESTAR TSO would materialise within the tremor of my hands. Tattooed over my bones in a web of HROSENG. There are dead trees beneath the surface of what was once a river. And it's shrinking by the hour.

*passing through
only the stars fall
thick and heavy*

BITE-SIZED BULLETS

The bed belches and spits out a bone. The excavators claim it is sixteen billion years old. It comes from your body before they start you on a steady diet of silence.

A fistful every meal.

And when you refuse. They pour white-hot-liquid-silence down your nose. Into the empty belly of dissent. Over the unkempt hair. Over a mirror that gathers dust. Over the picture of a mother who once birthed ten children. All dead.

Bleached bone is the colour of shrouds. All sixteen billion years old.

In the room, the only chair mates with newspapers. A curtain blots out the sky. The table hops by on a single leg. And you sharpen your teeth over the rusting bars of this prison.

alone
a sangai haggles
the cost of peace

PAREIDOLIA

The first time you fold a *kami* crane, you are naked waist up. You lean over the wall on the east end, a pale sun spilling in through the rusting iron bars of the only window in the room. Inch-thick bars of sunlight rising and falling over the contoured landscape of your body. But what I remember most, is the way your thin fingers trace over the creases of stark-white paper. Three times each fold.

'I want to fold a thousand cranes for you,' you say, 'One for every moment we get with each other.'

I don't . . . can't say anything. Just for a heartbeat. And then the moment is gone. From the thousand we were meant to have; I have lost one. Burnt to a cinder. A fleck of ash in an empty cup. Skimming the long-cold dregs of tea.

*a receding wave
takes my footprints
early sunset*

You have this way of quantifying the unknown. Six hundred and twenty-nine cranes later, you announce, 'When I die, you would move on in three days. Four at the max.'

There is no scope for an ambiguity, and I don't . . . can't say anything. Just for a heartbeat.

FRAGMENTS

One by one we throw a handful of sandalwood dust on the funeral pyre.
There is nothing much to say and a damp stillness hangs heavy over the pale morning. In the end, it's just nine maunds of wood for his sixty-eight summers, for the laughter that was spilled, the tears that were shed and memories we plucked from the air around his cold-stiff-silent body wrapped in a white shroud that would return to elements with lumps of jaggery, ghee and Kush grass.

*teeming city . . .
a rip in the soul
sounds like silence*

The sun is setting when the fire burns out. Dusk spilt cold across the almost-dry lake. The mourners have left long since.

Come tomorrow morning we will sift the ashes of his frail bones and immerse them in the gentle flow of the Ganges. Maybe on some far-off bank they would nourish the roots of a young plant testing the strength of its newfound life.

*cityscape . . .
the flight of a raven
almost free*

RAG DOLLS

All day long, we sit on the crumbling wall of the cemetery. Our feet, clad in mud-crusts Mary Janes, dangle inches above the wild grass.

There is silence . . . a blanket of windless heat punctuated by the caw of crows and the chatter of squirrels, until the first fat bullets of rain lodge themselves on our necks.

We shoulder the bags, put on our rain capes and begin the long walk back. We must have looked hunchbacked, the rain capes bulging over our oversized school bags. Once this would have been reason enough for ceaseless bouts of laughter, we may even have splashed about in the muddy puddles or tried to catch the raindrops on our tongue.

But not today.

*roar of rain . . .
knowing what she means
by 'he touches me'*

Pareesh Tiwari's "Rag Dolls" was a 2018 nominee for the Pushcart Prize.

HAIBUN UNCAGED

An Essay on Craft

One of the earliest definitions of haibun that I came across, explained contemporary haibun as 'a combination of prose and haiku poetry', sometimes described as 'a narrative of an epiphany'.

Haibun at the fundamental level might be seen as blocks of prose interspersed with haiku. And that's how simple it could be, only it isn't. A good haibun plays with a delicate balance where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The haiku when used right, links, shifts, and leaps beyond the scope of the prose to enrich the reading experience. If the prose is a meandering path, the haiku are birdcalls. They guide the travellers, not by holding their hand but by telling them that there is more to be explored. The haiku often allow the reader a toe inside the door, or a window to be privy to a parallel scene unfolding in the street below without ever leaving the room. They offer a different vantage point, a new strain of thought.

My poems have primarily dealt with the narratives of desires, deliriums, dissent, anxiety, and regrets. I have tried other forms, but haibun helps me expand the scope of what I say. It helps me find the link and shift between the falling of a leaf and a goodbye kiss.

And yet I know that haibun might still be the most ill-understood forms of poetry out there. Haiku is often seen as an exercise in counting syllables and haibun as a mixed form that generates mild curiosity but nothing more amongst non-practitioners of the form.

Haiku's and by extension haibun's democratic accessibility may also have had a role to play in an apparent demotion of the form from the higher echelons of literature. Haiku's brevity and apparent simplicity has often been its Achilles heel. Twitter and Instagram have played a stellar role in turning banal descriptions, aphorisms, or pop-philosophy into #haiku. The haiku poets over a period of time walled themselves in isolated groups, further widening the chasm between mainstream poetry and Japanese short forms.

In the past three years or so, I (along with countless other practitioners of the forms) have been steadily working towards broadening the acceptance of haiku and haibun in the literary community. My attempts to present haibun alongside mainstream poetry – be it in readings, lit fests or in anthologies and books – is about breaking down the walls segregating various forms of poetry. This has been done without any overt attempt to explain the form (I have always found that sort of self-defeating). I have ever had a utopian belief that good literature must work beyond the barriers of form, but I must admit that I have met with only limited success.

That brings me to the subject of this musing. Do we need to rethink the structure of haibun prose to enable assimilation, wider acceptance and as a natural step forward in the evolution of this form?

Michael McClintock in an interview with Susumu Takiguchi, *World Haiku Review*, had said:

[Haibun's] potential is enormous and hardly explored. There need be few or any constraints at all, except that it be written as an aesthetic whole, not a fragment. And that it includes haiku as a part of that whole, not as a mere attachment Beyond that fundamental proposition, we should not encumber ourselves with any assumptions about the content or style of delivery for English-language haibun The haibun is open to a huge range of expression: from the surreal and dreamlike to straight discursive narrative -- even journalism: from impressionistic writing to exposition and storytelling, meditation and the personal diary Unusual effects can be achieved, to the say the least, if compared to prose or poetry alone. In my opinion, haibun offers a kind of synoptic clarity and hybrid vigour that cannot be matched.

These words give me heart. They also goad me to experiment with the typical structure of prose that I have been following (I do understand that a lot of more accomplished haibuneers have been dismantling this structure for a while now).

I have almost always felt most comfortable in lines that represent sound-units, with an intuitive movement to break lines on grammatical phrases and clauses, to end-stop lines with punctuation. This most definitely comes from the fact that I have until very recently seen and explored haibun as a tapestry of prose and haiku. The prose then naturally functions in sentences instead of lines. I would like to see myself take more risks with my prose. I would like to allow tension and surprise to seep into how I break my sentences.

Logenbach, in *The Art of The Poetic Line*, says, "The line is no arbitrary unit, no ruler, but a dynamic force that works in conjunction with other elements of the poem: the syntax of the sentences, the rhythm of stressed and unstressed syllables, and the resonance of similar sounds."

He further points out that there are three types of lines: those that parse the syntax by ending the line on a grammatical phrase ending, those that annotate the syntax by ending the line in the middle of a grammatical phrase, and those that are end-stopped on a piece of punctuation. There is no one line shape better than another, but only that "dynamic force" that builds in how they all interact with the other poetic elements. "No particular line is valuable except in as much as it performs a dramatic function in relationship to other lines in a particular poem: one kind of line ending becomes powerful because of its relationship to other kinds of line endings". Thus, if we don't take hold of the responsibility for this drama of our lines, we're inviting staleness into our work.

Mary Oliver (in *A Poetry Handbook*) says, "It takes no more than two or three lines for a rhythm, and a feeling of pleasure in that rhythm, to be transferred from the poem to the reader... A meaningful rhythm will invite. A meaningless rhythm will dissuade. "

The question, however, remains, if line becomes the unit of prose in haibun, how would a haibun then be any different from a poem. The answer probably lies in the second part of the definition stated in the opening lines of this essay – a narrative of an epiphany. As Ken Jones has said elsewhere, "I expect haibun prose to be light handed, elusive, open-ended, playful, and even ironic, 'in the style of haiku'. And at a deeper, existential, level should we not expect something of that ambiguity and mystery found in the best haiku?"

Often in a haibun, we have two parallel realities, related, but with different rhythms. A haibun is essentially a linked form. Even when (in some rare cases) it decides to eschew the haiku. The link is much more internal to the rhythm of a haibun, which I believe cannot merely break down just because the prose part is written with more focus towards using all the dynamic power offered by the three kinds of line endings.

It is here that I would like to bring out as an example, one of the more exciting uses of line breaks that I have come across recently in a haibun. The following haibun by Shloka Shankar appeared in the September 19 edition of *Haibun Today*.

The Twins

*According to the u.s. census, more twins
are born under gemini than any other zodiac sign.*

I'm ruled by the twins
but I'm sans siblings.
Mercurial? Probably.

I might not even follow
this train of thought
long enough for you to...

in media res my story and yours

I read somewhere (I know *where*
but I'd rather not say)
that our little Gemini hearts
contain, would you believe it, secret rooms.
Yes. *Plural.*

Most of mine are locked.
Barricaded. Years of disuse.
Maybe one, okay, two of them
might contain a trunk
full of notes-to-self,
contradictory pieces
of an unfinished jigsaw.

It also said (quite flatteringly)
that we often paint the sky
our own shade of blue.
I pick *lapis lazuli*.
Or cobalt.
Cerulean?
Give it a few days, will you?

*starry night ...
i stop connecting
the dots*

I would like to go out on a limb to say, that this piece wouldn't work nearly as well if the prose parts were flatter. More horizontally spaced so to speak. If the poet had eschewed the responsibility of line breaks and instead stuck to sentences with end-punctuations, thereby sacrificing the palpable melody of this piece, I think the haibun would have lacked some of its vitality.

It is our habitual expectation - when we see a passage of prose – is that it will explain, not sing. The information-giving sentence (logical, functional, linear) is the conveyor belt that carries the business of our lives. As the critic D.W. Harding noted in his study of rhythm in literature, 'all the prose we ever read is chopped up into lines; we rightly pay no attention to them.' This is because page margins do not mark metre as line breaks do. Yet it is not uncommon for verse-like currents to eddy beneath the placid surface of prose in a haibun. I would like to see more haibuneers (including myself) free up the rhythm inherent to prose in a haibun.

This is not to say that a typical 'haikai prose' with one or several juxtaposed haiku needs to be shunned in favour of something more experimental. Au contraire, even in its traditional form, Haibun has seen slow but steady growth in the world of literature. More and more people are writing and reading it. But experiments with line breaks (along with diversification of the subjects that are handled) would be the next step in the progression of this wild and lush form.

To me the road head looks daunting and inviting. Both, in equal measures.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PARESH TIWARI is a writer, poet, and a cartoonist in the body of a Naval Officer. He has been widely published, especially in the sub-genre of Japanese poetry. The first collection of his haiku and haibun, *An Inch of Sky*, was published in 2014. Currently the resident cartoonist for *Cattails*, a journal by United Haiku and Tanka Society, USA, he was also commissioned for thirty-five illustrations for the December 16 edition of *Frameless Sky*. Tiwari has been invited to read his works at various literature festivals, including the Goa Art and Lit Fest – 2016, and has conducted haiku and haibun workshops at Hyderabad International Literature Festival – 2014, SIES College Mumbai and British Council Library, Mumbai. His second book of haibun, titled *Raindrops Chasing Raindrops* is in the bookstores now. Tiwari is O:JA&L's featured writer for March 2020.

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POLISH POETS

IN BEDS WITH GIRLS
AND OTHER TRUE STORIES

ERIK HARPER KLASS

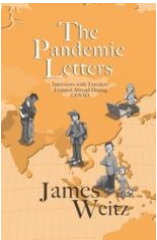


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