

Going Nowhere: Learning Haiku from Pico Iyer

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nowhere I have to be . . .
driftwood floats
on the tide

Cara Holman, *A Hundred Gourds* 2:3,
June 2013, 11

nowhere I need to be
a cabbage moth flits
among the daylilies

Hannah Mahoney, *Acorn* 39, Fall 2017, 2

deep autumn . . .
knowing there is nowhere
I have to be

Bill Kenney, *Frogpond* 35:1, Winter 2012, 22

It would seem that travel writers are always eager to extol the virtues of travel, how it broadens your mind, makes you aware of other points of view, challenges your assumptions about possibly everything, and thus gives you growth. But Pico Iyer is a travel writer who recognizes the value of home, of going nowhere, of how an appreciation for the ordinary, as with haiku poetry, can enhance your daily life. It's a different kind of growth. As he says, quoting Dorothy from *Wizard of Oz*, "If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard."

out of nowhere isn't

Marlene Mountain, *Roadrunner* VII:4,
November 2007

mindful
nowhere is
now here

Timothy Russell, *Heron Quarterly* 2:2,
April 1998

summer i go nowhere twice

Gregory Hopkins, *Roadrunner* IX:2, May 2009

Many haiku poets know Pico Iyer for his 1991 book *The Lady and the Monk: Four Seasons in Kyoto*, about a year spent in Japan. His most recent book, published in 2019, is *A Beginner's Guide to Japan* (both New York: Knopf). In 2017, he published *The Art of Stillness: Adventures in Going Nowhere* (New York: TED Books / Simon & Schuster). It grew out of a 2014 TED talk that you can find online (https://www.ted.com/talks/pico_ayer_the_art_of_stillness). The book is enhanced by contemplative pictures of oceans, mountains, clouds, and forests. He begins by describing a meeting with Leonard Cohen at Mt. Baldy Zen Center, and tells us that Cohen's monastery name is Jikan, which means the silence between two thoughts (2). This is the space of "ma" in haiku, the "dreaming room" between the poem's two juxtaposed parts where the best haiku find their deepest reverberation, much like, as Iyer notes, "the rest in a piece of music that gives it resonance and shape" (53). He also says, "Going nowhere, as Cohen described it, was the grand adventure that makes sense of everywhere else" (4). He also says, "as Cohen talked about the art of sitting still . . . I observed the sense of attention, kindness, and even delight that seemed to arise out of his life of going nowhere" (5), and that "Going nowhere . . . is not about austerity so much as about coming closer to one's senses" (6). I think of Mary Oliver, who said, in her prose poem "Yes! No!" (from *New and Selected Poems, Volume Two*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2005, 151), "To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work." She also said, in *A Poetry Handbook* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace

& Company, 1994, 106), that poetry “began through the process of seeing, and feeling, and hearing, and smelling, and touching, and then remembering—I mean *remembering in words*—what these perceptual experiences were like.” We can practice this sensing, this attention to the ordinary, right at home—nowhere. Home is the realm of haiku, of self care, and Iyer invites us to join “the adventure of going nowhere” (7). Nowhere, he asserts, is “a place of trust” (65).

first flakes
the nowhere voices
of geese

Ann K. Schwader, The Heron's Nest 14:2, June 2012

Under the full moon
I will stay nowhere this evening
but beside this pine tree

Buson, W. S. Merwin and Takako Lento, trans.,
Collected Haiku of Yosa Buson, Port Townsend:
Copper Canyon Press 2013, #530, 143

Footprints in the snow
leading
nowhere

Anita Arita, Modern Haiku 7:3, August 1976, 23

Iyer extends his invitation to writing too: “Writers, of course, are obliged by our professions to spend much of our time nowhere. Our creations come not when we’re out in the world, gathering impressions, but when we’re sitting still, turning those impressions into sentences [or haiku]. Our job, you could say, is to turn, through stillness, a life of movement into art” (21). As Wordsworth said, poetry is heightened emotion recollected in tranquility. In *A Bamboo Broom*, Harold G. Henderson described Bashō’s famous old-pond jumping-frog poem by saying that “there must have been external quiet for the sound to have been heard and *internal* quiet for it to have been noticed” (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1934, 34,

emphasis added). As Iyer says, “it’s only when you stop moving that you can be moved in some far deeper way” (22). And yet, in contrast, he adds, “the external environment can too easily be a reflection of—sometimes a catalyst for—an inner one” (33). With practice, we can balance the inner and the outer, and facilitate a pathway for their communication.

walking the tracks
my thoughts
go nowhere

Tom Clausen, Cornell University Mann
Library’s *Daily Haiku*, 25 January 2010

I’m back here in the middle
of nowhere—
At least I think so

Jack Kerouac, *Book of Haikus*, Regina
Weinreich, ed., New York: Penguin, 2003, 89

closing time
nowhere to go
but home

Renée Owen, *Contemporary Haibun Online* 5:2,
2009

Iyer proposes that the art of going nowhere can help give you contentment, and when life circumstances might even require us to stay home, we can learn to make the most of it. He quotes Blaise Pascal, who said, “All the unhappiness of men arises from one simple fact: that they cannot sit quietly in their chamber” (41). Earlier he quoted Cohen, who said “Going nowhere ... isn’t about turning your back on the world; it’s about stepping away now and then so that you can see the world more clearly and love it more deeply” (13). Or, as Abu Sa’id noted, “Take one step away from yourself—and behold!—the Path!” Indeed, Iyer emphasizes that “the ability to gather information, which used to be so crucial, is now far less important than the ability to sift through it” (42).

winter morning
a down comforter
and nowhere to go

Megan Elizabeth Monish, *Mainichi Daily News*,
March 2010

A dream of
belonging nowhere—
wheat ripens

Yoshitomo Abe, *World Haiku*, 2007, 6

carousel ride
laughing children going
nowhere . . . everywhere

Robert J. Gurnier, *Modern Haiku* 31:1, Winter–
Spring 2000, 10

Iyer also speaks of taking a “secular Sabbath.” “Doing nothing for a while,” he says, “is one of the hardest things in life” (53), and quotes Emily Dickinson, who wrote, “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church . . . I keep it, staying at Home” (56). He later says, “The point of gathering stillness is not to enrich the sanctuary or mountaintop but to bring that calm into the motion, the commotion of the world” (63). This desire to gather stillness, a kind of belonging, is a goal of haiku, or at least an effect. Ultimately, Pico Iyer concludes as follows (66):

In an age of speed . . . nothing could be more invigorating
than going slow.

In an age of distraction, nothing can feel more
luxurious than paying attention.

And in an age of constant movement, nothing is more
urgent than sitting still.

Of course, there’s no such thing as nowhere. Nowhere is effectively a metaphor for any place that may be ordinary or

indistinct. Nor do poems about the “nowheres” of our lives need to use the word “nowhere.” Rather, they can celebrate whatever might be ordinary in our homes, our neighbourhoods, our towns, and in every other aspect of our lives. Haiku poets celebrate the ordinary so we are well inclined and even encouraged to go nowhere as often as possible, to recognize the mysticism of the ordinary. Here’s to going nowhere with our lives, at least at times, and to writing haiku about the adventures of the ordinary.

blizzard
the pleasure
of going nowhere

Deb Baker, *The Heron’s Nest* 15:2, June 2013, 5

what the hell I’ll take a walk nowhere

Gerard John Conforti, *Modern Haiku* 38:2,
Summer 2007, 16

a rock
in the middle of nowhere
making it somewhere

Graham High, *Earth*, British Haiku Society,
2009

Postscript

I had the chance to meet Pico Iyer on 25 May 2019 at the Seattle Art Museum, when he gave a talk there from his book, *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells*. We talked for a few minutes about common acquaintances, the fact that my wife is Japanese, and how much I appreciated his *Art of Stillness* book. When I asked him if he wrote haiku, he laughed and said, “Oh, no—I stopped very quickly when I discovered how difficult it was!”