

Bombs or Balms: The Nonhaiku of Bob Kaufman

by Michael Dylan Welch

“You’re a poet. You can’t ever be alone. You have poetry.”

—Bob Kaufman

Many Beat poets of the mid twentieth century are known to have written haiku, such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Diane di Prima, Gary Snyder, Lew Welch, Michael McClure, Ruth Weiss, Philip Whalen, and others. I’d like to talk briefly, though, about a lesser-known Beat poet who did not write haiku. Bob Kaufman was a lonely iconoclastic African Jewish surrealist bohemian jazz performance street poet who lived from 1925 to 1986. He was more popular in France, where he has been referred to as the African Rimbaud. He spent most of his poetic life in San Francisco after many years as a merchant marine, an occupation he shared with Kerouac. In 1959, with Allen Ginsberg and others, he cofounded *Beatitude*, an influential magazine that published early Beat poetry. After learning of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, he took an infamous vow of silence for ten years, itself a “poetic project” (according to George Fragopoulis) and a “Buddhist vow of silence” (according to Eileen Kaufman) that we might interpret as a long inhalation before the exhalation of his poetry resumed in 1973. He broke his silence the day the Vietnam War ended. He recited many of his poems from memory, often never writing them down, but his poems have been assembled from various sources in *Collected Poems of Bob Kaufman* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2019), edited by Neeli Cherkovski, Raymond Foye, and Tate Swindell. Although Kaufman seems not to have penned haiku himself, the following emeralds of his poetry are particularly short (rare among his work) and hint of haiku techniques.

To start, here are thirteen of thirty-five pieces from an assemblage titled “Jail Poems,” written in 1959 in cell three of the San Francisco City Jail, immediately bringing to mind the jail haiku of Johnny Baranski. I’ve chosen these numbered selections for their brevity

and sometimes strong images, a kinship with haiku (42–47):

- 10 Yellow-eyed dogs whistling in evening.
- 11 The baby came to jail today.
- 13 The jail, a huge hollow metal cube
Hanging from the moon by a silver chain.
Someday Johnny Appleseed is going to chop it down.
- 15 Three long strings of light
Braided into a ray.
- 17 Shadows I see, forming on the wall,
Pictures of desires protected from my own eyes.
- 19 Sitting here writing things on paper.
Instead of sticking the pencil into the air.
- 21 Now I see the night, silently overwhelming day.
- 23 Cities should be built on one side of the street.
- 24 People who can't cast shadows
Never die of freckles.
- 25 The end always comes last.
- 28 There, Jesus, didn't hurt a bit, did it.
- 32 From how many years away does a baby come?
- 35 Come, help flatten a raindrop.

Here, with these selections at least, Kaufman is privileging the brief, the concise. That alone holds an affinity with haiku, but this

is not enough to equate any of these poems to haiku. Images enliven some of these pieces, as with yellow-eyed dogs, shadows on a wall, and writing on paper. But other brevities here are more conceptual, sharing speculations, telling us ideas, tending to push these poems away from haiku. Yet, sometimes, image and idea meet, asking us, for example, how we might flatten a raindrop. The answer, perhaps, would be to step on it.

In Kaufman's 1958 City Lights press broadside, *Abomunist Manifesto*, fifteen pieces, ranging from two to four lines, appear in a set titled "Boms" (63–64). They may bring to mind the aphoristic "Jottings" of E. E. Cummings, yet also the surrealism of avant-garde gendai haiku, each one a bomb of words, or perhaps a balm. As Kaufman himself wrote elsewhere in *Abomunist Manifesto*, perhaps talking of poetry as a spiritual transcendence, "Subud [a spiritual movement] can lock you in strange rooms with vocal balms" (59). Here are some of Kaufman's "Boms," the title itself a condensing of the poet's first and last names.

- IV Ageless brilliant colored spiders webbing eternally
 instead of taking showers under the fire hydrants in summer.
- V Unruly hairs in the noses of statues in public gardens
 were placed there by God in a fit of insane jealousy.
- VIII Misty-eyed, knee-quaking me, gazing on the family Home,
 realizing that I was about to burn it down.
- IX Waterspouts, concealed in pig knuckle barrels, rumbled,
 as tired storms whispered encouragement.
- X Angry motives scrambled for seating space
 shaking their fist at the moon.
- XII Daily papers suicide from tree tops
 purpling the lawn with blueprints.

XIII Caribou pranced in suburban carports
hoofmarking the auto-suggestions.

XV Disordered aquariums, dressed in shredded wheat,
delivered bibles to pickles crying in confessionals.

It seems that we cannot know meaning here. Perhaps they are anti-meaning. These seemingly self-involved poems rush over the reader with absent or elusive hooks of understanding, and perhaps that's their point, the poet pleasing himself and maybe himself only, with a fascination for words even if devoid of public connection.

Later, with a more overt reference to Japan, Kaufman wrote "Bonsai Poems," presenting eight numbered brevities, all in two lines except one. Some are aphoristic, others being moments of observation that echo with haiku awareness (143–144). These poems appeared previously in *The Ancient Rain: Poems 1956–1978*, published by New Directions in 1981.

II All those well-meaning people who gave me obscure books
When what I really needed was a good meal.

IV Men who love women
Should never go swimming.

V Every time I see an old man carrying a shabby cardboard suitcase,
I think he is an eternity agent on some secret mission.

VI I never understand other people's hopes or desires
Until they coincide with my own; then we clash.

VIII The culture of the cave man disappeared, due to his inability
To produce a magazine that could be delivered by a kid on a bicycle.

Although Kaufman was a Buddhist, and thus seemingly open to Zen influences upon haiku, the preceding sets of poems were as short as he got, perhaps because so much of his poetry relied on longer jazz-

riff lines, more prolonged exposition, and improvised rhythms and flows that haiku couldn't begin to sustain. In the context of so many Beat-era poets who wrote haiku, Kaufman seems to be an exception, choosing a different and iconoclastic approach for his poems. Other Beat poets, notably Jack Kerouac and Ruth Weiss, performed haiku with jazz accompaniment, and Kaufman often performed with music and wrote about jazz and with a jazz-inflected spontaneity, but his writing and performing stayed almost completely with longer poetry.

A few other short poems pepper Kaufman's *Collected Poems*, such as the following, the second of which speaks to the awe and mystery of the moment, revered in Japanese poetry as the so-called haiku moment, which typically fills haiku poets with awe and gratitude.

REFLECTIONS ON A SMALL PARADE

When I see the little Buddhist scouts
Marching with their Zen mothers
To tea ceremonies at the rock garden,
I shake my head. . . . It falls off. (12)

AWE

At confident moments, thinking on Death
I tell my soul I am ready and wait
While my mind knows I quake and tremble
At the beautiful Mystery of it. (125)

MORNING JOY

Piano buttons, stitched on morning lights.
Jazz wakes with the day,
As I awaken with jazz, love lit the night.
Eyes appear and disappear,
To lead me once more, to a green moon.
Streets paved with opal sadness,

Lead me counterclockwise, to pockets of joy,
And jazz. (143)

DEMOLITION

They have dismantled
The Third Avenue El;
It's still the same though,
They haven't removed
Those torn-down men. (144)

FROM A PAINTING BY EL GRECO

I am the eternity that was held
By the ostrich egg.
The magnificent December is now
No longer hidden.
The sun, I am alone, is present forever.
(160, originally in all capitals)

The following is an excerpt from “A Buddhist Experience” (195–196, originally in all capitals), shared not as an example of short poetry but to acknowledge the sky that Kaufman inhabited with his jazz poetry:

A BUDDHIST EXPERIENCE

Cannot give it a name or shape,
...
To interpret life and by that interpretation
To live more deeply in Zen,
Zen of the real red bone,
Like Coltrane,
Who is playing the saxophone,
Speaking of life and death
And what lies in between,
The balloons rising up
Seem to take the poet to the sky

The relative brevity of even the preceding poems is uncommon in Kaufman's output, and yet we have hints of greater brevity here and there. For example, the earlier "Boms," from *Abomunist Manifesto*, find an echo in "Abomunistorical Oddities," published in *Beatitude* in 1959 (174–175). Its six playful pieces are more overtly aphoristic, each naming a famous person, as with these sometimes surreal examples.

Beethoven is reliably reported to have been busted.

Benjamin Franklin was duped by a little boy who couldn't get his kite up.

The mimeograph machine was invented in Tibet in 1789 by Marcel Marceau by accident as he played with a prayer wheel.

Walt Disney invented Lewis Carroll in 1861 while sliding through a rainspout on a teacup. He fainted, and lost his hat.

Indeed, as with haiku, Bob Kaufman's poems range from bombs to balms. The conclusion for haiku poets may be only to recognize that, unlike most other Beat poets, Kaufman did not write haiku—or, at least, apparently none that were ever preserved or published. Yet, perhaps like all accomplished poets, and in ways beyond the examples shared here, he was able to tap into concision, compression, wordplay, image, and silence at least partly in the manner of haiku.

Michael Dylan Welch has been investigating haiku since 1976. He is a director for the Haiku North America conference, founder and president of the Tanka Society of America, cofounder of the American Haiku Archives, and founder/director of the Seabeck Haiku Getaway and National Haiku Writing Month. His haiku, essays, and reviews have appeared in hundreds of journals and anthologies in at least 22 languages. Michael lives in Sammamish, Washington, and currently coedits First Frost. His website is www.graceguts.com.