

"this old world": composing a digital haiga on the iPad

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this old world
eye to eye with fireflies
two stories up

Where to start

Usually I start a haiga with the haiku. Something about the image or moment I'm trying to portray will seem incomplete. I don't mean that the haiku cannot stand on its own but rather that the thing I want to express can be strengthened with the right imagery. I find haiga work better for me when it starts with the poem rather than starting with an image or a photograph. I find it more emotionally freeing to work from words to images than the opposite. If I start with the image I find myself more likely to write a caption than to write a poem. But if I start with a poem I am more likely to delve into the emotional content with the imagery to create something that resonates or harmonizes or offers a counterpoint with the poem. It is important to understand what works best for you, in this regard.

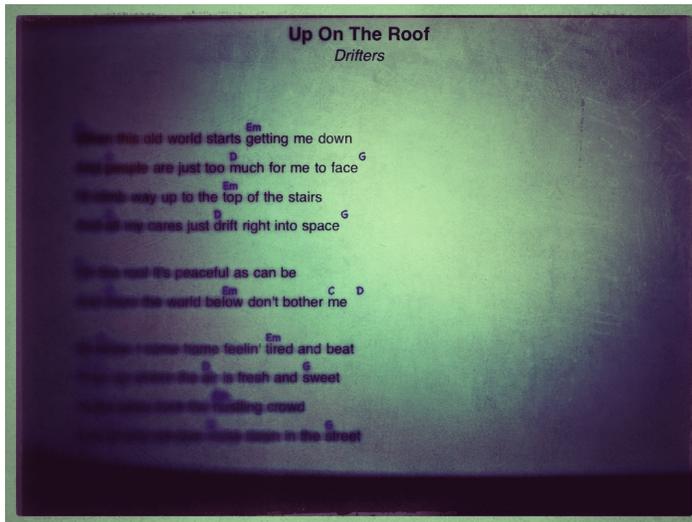
The haiga I want to talk about in this essay began with a poem written while sitting on my second story screened porch, which is closely surrounded by oaks and elms and has the feel of a treehouse. It is a place of calm, a retreat from a demanding job, life's upsets, and the usual stresses. The last two lines of the haiku---eye to eye with fireflies / two stories up---were written first and described the actual moment. The first line---this old world---was taken from the old Drifters song "[Up on the Roof](#)" which spontaneously came to mind as I was writing. But as right as that line felt on it's own, I knew that many (perhaps most) readers would miss the musical reference and, hence, the tension between feeling that life is "too much" and the blessing of having a place where one can rise above the fray and just let it all go. I thought knowledge of the musical reference added this emotional depth, allowing layers to unfold in the haiku as a result of the lyrical reference. So I started thinking about how to get those layers in via imagery.

Image as referent

The first idea that came to mind was to add an image of the song lyrics and chords as a backdrop to the haiku. I play some ukulele and pulled up the lyrics in an app on my iPad called [SongBook](#) (a great way to always have a bunch of music on hand). I saved a screenshot of the lyrics to the iPad photo album by simultaneously holding down the "home" button and the on/off switch.

Digital image editing

Next I pulled the screenshot up in a photo editing app called [Snapseed](#). I played around with the screenshot image with the various built-in tools, adding textures and filters, blurring out some sections and highlighting others. I wanted the mood of the song to be discernible to those who did not know the words, without either distracting from the haiku as the poetic center or getting into copyright issues with the lyrics. When I was



satisfied with the overall look of the image I saved it to the photo album. Sidenote: It is important to make sure you have the image-save defaults set for the highest resolution possible in any app you use.

I felt that the use of the lyric image by itself would be too distracting. While more pleasing aesthetically than a footnote, the image was basically the proverbial finger pointing at the moon. I wanted the moon.

I briefly considered adding a ukulele to the image but that was personal, idiosyncratic, and a distraction from the poem. As I revisited the mood of the haiku I felt that what was needed was a graphic image aligned with the poetic image of the last two lines. I wanted the mood but I did not want to end up with a photo-caption haiku. I therefore decided to use a layering effect, with a washed-out image of trees as the foundation and the song lyric image on top.

Layering images

To do the layering I used an iPad app called [SketchBook Pro](#), which includes most of the standard graphic design tools. This is the most complicated graphics app I use on the iPad and I also have a version of it on my iMac, which means I can sketch out a design on the iPad and if it gets too complex I can save it to the "cloud" and finish it up on a machine with more memory, more tools, and a significantly bigger screen. For this haiga, that extra step wasn't necessary. The iPad was sufficient.

In SketchBook Pro on the iPad I started a new project with two layers. Layers in a program like this are like working with tracing paper, in that you can work out design elements separately on each sheet or layer, and see how they look combined. It means you don't have to start over from scratch if you mess up one of the layers; you can just delete that layer. Or you can do a rough sketch in one layer, trace over it with a new layer to refine the details, and then delete the rough sketch. There is a learning curve with this kind of graphic design app but it opens up some serious creative possibilities.

For my first layer I imported a photo of trees from my stash of iPad photostream photos, selecting one that had good contrast and strong linearity in the tree trunks and limbs.

This photo was taken on an iPhone using a photography app called [Hipstamatic](#), with digital filters that saturated the colors while bringing out highlights. The contrast was important to ensure the tree imagery would still be clear when the image was faded. The linearity was important for the resonance with the feeling of being "two stories up" as described in the haiku. The photo was taken on a small ridge looking down into a ravine, which gave the right scale and perspective for the poem. A sweeping panorama from a mountain top might have been beautiful as an image but it would have been out proportion for this haiga.



Fading the image was a simple matter of using a slider bar on the layer tool in SketchBook Pro to increase the transparency of the image. Next I imported the song lyric image into the second layer, using the layer tool. I played around with the size and placement of the lyric image. I decided to place it in the upper left corner of the tree image, reducing it in size to a bit more than half the length and width of the full image. That seemed to give the right weight and balance to the composition. This placement also left a generous amount of space for the haiku in the lower right, which would keep the song text from dominating the haiku.

The green hue of the song lyric image brought color intensity back to the transparent trees in that corner. It also had the feel of an upper story window or view. I decided to add one last touch, and used one of the many "brushes" in SketchBook Pro to give just a hint of the fireflies via clusters of tiny yellow-green dots interspersed among the trees behind the song lyrics. I did a little mental debate with myself about whether that was getting too close to making the haiku a caption, and decided it was subtle enough to avoid that trap. I saved the multi-layered graphic design as a jpg image in the iPad photo album, using the highest resolution option.

Placing the poem in the image

Next I needed to add the haiku. I decided to do that using an app called [Diptic](#) that includes a basic, easy-to-use tool for adding text to images. It includes a variety of fonts and the ability to easily resize and reposition the text box. Diptic also has a number of built-in filters and frame tools. I experimented with those as well, and found that I liked some of the filter effects as they brought out the tree imagery behind the lyrics in an interesting way. I finally felt that I had the moon and not the finger pointing to it. I saved the revised image with the haiku to the iPad photo album.

Now there was just one last step: I needed to sign the haiga. Often I just add another text box with my name and the month and year, choosing a font, size and color that is readable but not distracting. This time I decided to use an app called [A+ Signature](#) that lets you capture your actual signature on the iPad using your finger or a stylus. You then add the signature to your image, resizing and positioning it as desired. You can also make it lighter or darker as needed to stand out against the background where it is placed. I decided on a white signature in the darker lower left corner.

In summary, I used six applications to create the haiga (five on the iPad, one previously used to process a photo on the iPhone). From the writing of the haiku to the completed haiga took about 3 hours. Since this particular haiku came together quickly and in-the-moment, most of that time was spent on the imagery. Not a bad way to spend a Sunday evening in July.

