

THE WAY OF HAIKU

Naomi Beth Wakan

haiku by Bashō

HAROLD G. HENDERSON STATES that no two Japanese would quite agree on exactly what constitutes a haiku. Indeed the definitions range from haiku being considered purely literary efforts to haiku representing supreme moments of Zen awakening, with haiku as socio-cultural items being somewhere in between. As the definition field seems wide open, I might as well step immediately into an arena where angels fear to tread and attempt to define haiku—those brief poems

that seem so easy to write and yet turn out to be so difficult that Bashō, the master of haiku, claimed to have written only ten good ones in a lifetime of writing. As befits a *haijin* (a writer of haiku), however, I will first give a deep Japanese bow and defer to older and definitely wiser (and some deceased) poets, letting them state their definitions before I offer mine. Bashō said that “haiku is a flash of insight. What is happening in this place, at this moment.” To this he added rather cryptically: “If you want to learn about

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Watanabe Kazan, Authentic Portrait of Matsuo Bashō, c. 1835

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the pine, go to the pine. If you want to learn about the bamboo, go to the bamboo.” What

**snow having melted
the whole village is brimful
of happy children**

can I say about this advice? Only that when the skin between you and the object dissolves (again turning to Bashō), “when you and the object become one, your poetry issues of its own accord.” The fusion with the object allows the object to express its own qualities rather than have external projections put on it by the poet.

To see things as they are in the here and now seems to be an important haiku element. As Robert Spiess so neatly defines it, “The whole of life is in each moment, not in the past, not in the future, and thus a true haiku is virtually important because it is a moment of total genuine awareness of the reality of the Now.” Ishikawa Takuboku, although writing about *tanka* (a traditional Japanese poetic form arranged in five lines), also understood the importance of capturing the moment when he said, “Although a sensation may last only a second, it is a second that will never return again. I refuse to let such moments slip by.”

Haiku link all people by the use of seasonal images, but the exact image chosen . . . well, that depends on the individual poet. By using a familiar seasonal image, poets, if they capture

the moment with intensity, can link their moment to all moments.

Again, accentuating

the moment, Jim Kacian quotes an unnamed writer who states, “the poem should vanish . . . leaving us holding the moment it describes.”

Now for R. H. Blyth, who wrote many volumes on haiku and almost single-handedly delivered this poetry form onto the English-speaking stage: “A haiku is the expression of a temporary enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things.” He also stated: “Haiku does not aim at beauty. Like the music of Bach, it aims at significance, and some kind of beauty is found hovering near.”

Temporary enlightenment . . . well, that was all the rage in the years after the Second World War when Zen swept into California and beyond. Jane Reichhold, however, pleaded for a less ambitious definition of haiku, so let’s start with a few basics from Japan.

A traditional haiku, for the Japanese, is a poem of 5, 7, 5 phonetic sounds respectively, focused on a season, and on one particular moment within the season. Because of this, haiku are always written in the present tense, even if they are recording a moment long gone. The emotion of the moment is suggested by the described scene that stimulated it.

Harold G. Henderson put these ideas together and defined haiku as “a re-

cord of a moment of emotion in which human nature is somehow linked to all nature.” He expands this by making the judgment that “all haiku worthy of the name are records of high moments—higher at least than the surrounding plain.” Well, that seems a more modest demand than requesting it be a *satori* (enlightenment) moment every time. Just because haiku allow you to appreciate the briefness of life, they don’t necessarily demand a Zen enlightenment experience before they can be written.

While we should not demand a *satori* moment in order to write haiku, neither should haiku be just an intellectual exercise recording something that we have noticed. Ishida Hakyō announced: “Haiku is not intellect, rather it is flesh . . . haiku is not literature, haiku is raw life . . . composing haiku is synonymous with living life.” Clark Strand also points out: “a haiku is not a photograph, it is a poem.” Form aids the process of transforming the image into a poem, and while Henderson muses on the future form of haiku in English, he too points out that “a haiku is a poem and not a dribble of prose.”

Daisetz Suzuki tries to cram a large

**temple bells die out
the fragrant blossoms remain
a perfect evening!**

number of aspects into his exploration of what a haiku is. “A haiku is the shortest

form of poetry we can find in world literature. It consists of seventeen syllables [sic] into which have been cast some of the highest feelings human beings are capable of.” Suzuki continues: “At the supreme moment of life and death we just utter a cry or take to action, we never argue, we never give ourselves up to lengthy talk. Feelings refuse to be conceptually dealt with, and a haiku is not the product of intellection. Hence its brevity and significance.”

These are high ambitions for what is considered second-class poetry by poets of longer forms. Because so many people try to write haiku, particularly in Japan, where literally millions of people participate in haiku groups and competitions, haiku is often deemed a second-class form of poetry. This opinion is mostly declared by academic elitists who feel they have to set the standards for poetic excellence and that few will achieve these standards. Forget them! Haiku is a democratic poetry form. You don’t need any kind of special knowledge to write haiku; you just need to see things clearly. Haiku-writing is as valid a way of expressing deep and



Yoshitoshi Taiso, Matsuo Bashō, c. 1880

condensed images as any other form of poetry.

The excellent Canadian haijin George Swede suggests that the following characteristics should be present in haiku: “brief; express a sense of awe, or transcendent insight; involve some aspect of nature (other than human); possess sense images; and present an event as happening now.” He felt that the “Zen-like focus on the here and now” was the most telling of these criteria. And to quote him again: “it [haiku] is to glimpse the world that is related to beings, to nature or to the world where human beings and nature are living together, and there is a highly perceptive juxtaposition.”

So here we are introduced to another haiku element: *toriwase* (the juxtaposition). Haiku usually include two images, the juxtaposition of which presents both images in a fresh light. The juxtaposition is accentuated by a break in the haiku.

For many people the break is the essence of haiku. It is the break that causes us to pause and let the essence of the haiku come through. From the pause comes the unsaid. In Japanese, the break is indicated by *kireji* (cutting words). The break accentuates the two images—nature and human nature juxtaposed, paralleled, or contrasted. However, the juxtaposition

the heron pecks at its reflection shallow water

demands a segue, a connection between the two parts of the haiku. Speaking of the images, Patricia Donegan draws an

interesting parallel when she states that “there needs to be two electric poles between which a spark leaps for the haiku to be effective; otherwise it is just a brief statement.” Here are two spark-leaping haiku:

spring rain
follows the bee’s nest
leaking through the roof

—Bashō,

translated by Susumu Takiguchi

• • •

on the Buddha’s
lofty face some spots
autumn rain

—Murakami Kijō

We don’t usually associate a bee’s nest with spring rain or spots with Buddha’s face, yet here the images are beautifully linked.

The depth of perception that George Swede speaks of is accentuated by Patricia Donegan when she talks of the *hon-i* aspect of haiku, which she defines as “the way to call the spirit of the thing named.” She points out that *tanka*, the precursor of haiku, are chanted

rather than recited and originated in “spells and chants to invoke the deity.”

at every doorway
from the mud on wooden clogs
spring begins anew

because it makes you say, ‘Ah, now I see!’”

Michael
Dylan
Welch, a

She wonders whether that power lingers on in haiku. Others, too, have suggested that through the *kigo* (seasonal word), haiku has direct links back to the shaman and the words he would call out to summon the nature spirits.

Robert Hass also speaks of haiku as “magical and ritual accounts of the Japanese year,” and this definition again places accentuation on the season about which the haiku is being written and also on the linking of haiku back through *waka* (an earlier name for *tanka*) to the earliest form of Japanese poetry — incantations to the gods. Whether haikin are communicating with the gods is open for discussion. However, by identifying with the moment, haikin are able to efface themselves and allow a clearer kind of “seeing” to occur, a heightened awareness. *Makoto* is the word for this in Japanese, and like most Japanese words embedded deep in their culture, it is inadequate to translate it simply as “sincerity,” but that will have to do for the moment. David Cobb describes *makoto* as “the truth of the poet’s heart.”

Insight does seem to be a key characteristic of haiku, as Kazuo Sato expresses it: “Haiku is a poetry of ‘ahness’

well-known haiku writer and promoter of everything haiku, defined haiku this way for *Poets Market, 2005*: “Haiku is typically a three-line poem that uses concrete sensory images to convey or imply natural and human seasonal phenomena, using a two-part juxtapositional structure as well as simple and primarily objective language. Originally a Japanese genre of poetry now written and adapted in many languages worldwide, traditional haiku in Japanese consists of seventeen phonetic sounds (not to be confused with syllables) in a pattern of 5, 7, 5. Because of differences in language, this rhythm is generally not followed for literary haiku in most languages other than Japanese. As intuitive and emotional poems, haiku often capture a sense of wonder and wholeness in presenting existence such as it is. Rather than presenting one’s emotions, haiku present the cause of one’s emotions, thus empowering the reader to have the same intuitive reaction to an experience that the poet had.”

Well, that does rather say it all, but still, here’s my rather modest offering: “Haiku are small verses, centered in the here and now, thus often including a seasonal reference, that

present juxtaposed images in a way that opens the moment described to a

deeper depth of understanding, not just of that particular moment, but of all moments in space and time.”

HOW TO WRITE HAIKU

I feel that haiku, like pixies, do not appear on demand. You have to be occupied elsewhere (not just idly doing something else, but really engrossed)—in weeding, being aware of the soles of your feet while walking, collecting shells on the beach, doing laundry. Only then will a haiku come through. You can long to create a haiku all you want, but fussing and wanting and desiring and demanding will all come to nothing.

One aspect of writing haiku is simple in that when something hits you, you just state what you are sensing at that moment. As Shiki instructed, one should record “the objective description of objects, and through them the stimulation of the emotions of the reader.”

As to subject matter, the traditional Japanese haiku focused on nature by using seasonal words and topics. I feel that because all manmade objects are ultimately made of materials existing in

temple bells die out
the fragrant blossoms remain
a perfect evening!

nature, any topic is open to haiku use. Things we think of as unpleasant or ugly

have no evaluation when used in a haiku — they just are:

fleas, lice
the horse peeing
near my pillow

— Bashō

Haiku are not about exotica. They are about the everyday, so everyone can readily understand them. As to form and rules, you can’t differ from the Japanese too much or else your effort won’t be a haiku, but how much is not too much? I usually start with what I think is the essence of a haiku—the intense sensual moment when I identify with an external scene and lose sense of self. Since that is the essence of haiku for me, what form do I choose? I prefer to stay with Blyth’s three lines of two beats, three beats, two beats; using only capitals for proper names; and as little punctuation as possible. Jane Reichhold has said that by using punctuation, in most cases the writer has copped out and hasn’t distinguished the two parts of the haiku clearly enough because of their inadequate choice of words. I agree, but I do have a weakness for ellipses (“ . . . ”) to indicate a pause.

WHY WRITE HAIKU?

Why bother with haiku in the twenty-first century when so many other things can occupy your time?

- As Clark Strand so beautifully says, “it restores balance.” Writing haiku literally brings you to your senses, grounds you, and helps you see things from a wider perspective, from a correcting position.
- Recording haiku alerts the haikai to a greater awareness of the universe and the mystery of the relatedness between seemingly unrelated things. Haiku helps you appreciate the interdependence of all things and the importance of the reactions your behavior may have on all things, organic or not.
- The electric light removed the difference between night and day, and heating and cooling systems have evened out the seasons, therefore haiku plays an important role in reminding us that we are still a part of nature ourselves and subject to the cycles that all manifestation goes through.
- Bashō’s quote is relevant here: “reinvigoration of the heart through communion with nature.”
- Haiku are the penetration of concepts in order to become more thoroughly acquainted personally

with the truth of things as they really are . . . the “suchness” of things. Grass, moon, waves

**on sweet plum blossoms
the sun rises suddenly
look, a mountain path**

directness and lack of guile, as only some children (and some very old people) can.

are ordinary things, yet experiencing them by writing haiku can, at the deepest level, bring us face to face with truth by using feelings and intuition rather than intellect—the grass-ness, the moon-ness, the wave-ness of things. This understanding seems to me to be the foundation of haiku. Haiku present the mysteries in a way that reverberates with the deepest level of our beings. And it is all ordinary! Haiku express “when the finite becomes conscious of the infinite residing within it,” as said by Daisetz T. Suzuki.

- Haiku writing makes you more conscious of the words you choose in expressing yourself and the clarity with which you can communicate.
- Writing haiku helps you appreciate the wonder of ordinary things and ordinary days.
- Haiku can make you curious about Japanese culture and the subtle sensibilities that are displayed by its master craftspeople, writers, and artists.
- Haiku writing trains you to see with

- Haiku keep you anchored in the present rather than brooding on the past or worrying about the future. Jane Reichhold felt that writing haiku is a discipline, and if you are interested in haiku, you are seeking more discipline in your life.
- One doesn’t need money or qualifications to write haiku, just pencil and paper.



It is good to look on all things as in progress: unfolding, growing, decaying, dying, being reborn, hating, loving, spirals of energy . . . constantly shimmering. A haiku is a pause, a cross-section, a still. Maybe what we think of as the pulsating energy of life is a series of stills, just as a cartoon is. Animation is a set of stillnesses. The haikai sees the stillness in the animation. Not every time, of course, but when the heart stops in admiration, a stillness has been captured. Yet even as it is captured and pinned down on three lines, it has escaped and vanished into the next stillness, the next animation. 🌸



Mori Ippō, *The Poet Bashō*, c. 1830