

SOME NOTES ON WRITING HAIKU

Penny Harter

Introduction

While some writers believe that haiku can only be written from immediate and actual experience, others create haiku from long ago memory, from fantasy, or from combining the real and the imaginary. After all, some moments are purely interior. The categories of experience I call “haiku moments” also fit many “poem moments.” For me, haiku must be brief, image-centered, and devoid of metaphor or simile. Both my haiku and my longer poems result from a sudden awareness of connection between the moment and the feelings that arise from it, or from my sensing a relationship between and among aspects of the object or experience perceived, remembered, or created.

For me, experiences that lead to a haiku or poem do so for one of several reasons: 1) The beautiful or the horrible compels me to participate in it. 2) Like or unlike objects, events, or persons relate in a new but inevitable way, creating a kind of spark gap. 3) Something seems very different from the way it usually appears or occurs.

The most effective haiku seem to occur in a particular time and place. To make this happen, I use the present tense and clear images, and avoid rhyme (overbearing sound can detract from the image). A haiku does not require complete sentences, and may include conventional punctuation or none.

Haiku Content: Nature and the Seasons

Although most haiku seem to center on moments in nature, others need not do so; instead, verses may comment on human

interactions with the natural world, and on human activities and observances. Japanese haiku poets use “season words”—words and phrases associated with the seasons because they relate to natural events or human activities that occur in the seasonal cycle, or to events that have become traditionally associated with the seasons. The latter include natural phenomena that may occur at any time of the year but become most prominent at one time or another (for example, frogs in spring, the moon in autumn) and cultural events that recur on specific dates (such as secular and religious holidays and public celebrations).

For many non-Japanese poets, the essence of haiku lies in the re-creation of a moment when one was moved, a moment which may or may not involve nature, though more and more writers of haiku worldwide are deliberately using seasonal references. For example, when I saw the following, I sorrowed about the use of the heavens for potential warfare, and regretted the fact that we were cluttering them with tons of space junk:

distant thunder
overhead a satellite
moves in the dark

In the sound of the thunder, I seemed to hear gunfire or explosions. I did not know then that Japanese haiku poets consider “thunder” a summer season word, but I accept this as a poem of summer when we are more likely to be outside at night and often hear distant thunder.

Senryu, or Human-Centered Haiku

Haiku-like verses that offer wry commentary on the foibles and foolishness of human nature are known as *senryu*, a related but somewhat separate genre. Here are two of my *senryu*:

hardly snowing
yet the child in boots
high-steps through it

closed bedroom door—
her shadow crosses
the crack of light

Haiku Form: Beyond Counting

Our understanding of haiku form has shifted over the years. Some writers in English (and other languages) still adhere to the formula of 17 syllables in three lines of 5, 7, and 5 respectively. However, a number of translators have pointed out significant differences between the Japanese and English languages. For those who wish to write haiku in English in a fixed form that closely parallels the duration and rhythm of traditional Japanese haiku, R. H. Blyth proposed a form of three lines having two, three, and two accented beats, respectively. In the last decade or two, more poets have been using this 2-3-2 form. Other poets have experimented with a one-line form proposed by Hiroaki Sato, who also suggests 10-12 syllables as the ideal haiku length in English. Today, most English-language poets write in a more organic form; some simply observe a short-longer-short, three-line rhythm that varies from poem to poem.

Traditional Japanese haiku normally include a “cutting word” (*kireji*), a sort of verbal punctuation that divides the poem into

two parts. While one can write a haiku with no obvious break, often a grammatical break serves a useful purpose. It supports another technique common to haiku, “association of ideas” (*rensō*). The leap from one thing to another, which I earlier called a “spark gap,” is often signaled in English by an ellipsis, a dash, or at least a line break that stops the thought, rather than running it on into the next line. All of these techniques demonstrate *renso*. In all three examples above, the opening line is end-stopped. That is, nothing in the grammar urges the reader quickly to the next line to complete the meaning. (In contrast, the grammar of each poem’s second line almost forces the reader onward.)

A one-line haiku with no extra spaces invites the reader to experiment with the location of the break, or perhaps to give up the notion of a break at all:

mallards leaving in the water rippled sky

I could have divided the poem in several places, but to do so would have disturbed the unbroken gliding of the ducks from the water into the sky. I wanted the reader to feel all the possibilities. In the following three examples, the meaning shifts dramatically depending on how I break the lines:

mallards leaving—
in the water
rippled sky

mallards
leaving
in the water
rippled sky

mallards
leaving in the water
rippled sky

Writing haiku can certainly teach the importance of appropriate line breaks.

Haiku Sequences and Longer Poems

Haiku can also be connected to create a sequence, moving from moment to moment of the perceived experience. On a trip to Japan in 1997, I wrote the following. As I read it now, I revisit the time and place:

THE SCENT OF CEDAR

*At Nikko Toshogu Shrine
for Yatsuka Ishihara*

stone lanterns—
five chambers rising
in the cedar's shade

broken cedar stump
its mildewed center open
to the Earth

mist between the cedars
and on the far hillside
a forest of mist

on the cedar slope
cut pieces of a trunk
touch each other

stone lanterns
darken in the dusk—
the scent of cedar

In a haiku sequence the haiku all revolve around the same experience like spokes of a wheel. Writing haiku has also influenced the way I write some longer poems. The following poem from my book inspired by the wood-block prints of Hiroshige and Hokusai, *Stages and Views*, shows how haiku-like verses can fuse into an even more sustained whole:

KANBARA

On the distant hills
snow folds into snow—
black specks of pine.

Near branches sag,
only a few tips
still uncovered.

Bent against the weather,
villagers climb the slope.
Their geta chop holes.

All the thatched roofs—
one white silence.

Haiku came into my life after I had already begun writing and publishing poems. Writing a good haiku has certainly been its own reward for me, as it is for many poets worldwide. At the same time, haiku's focus on sense-appealing images, juxtaposition, and the maximum impact from the fewest words has helped me to notice more connections in the world around me and to refine all my writing. I think that many people who write haiku find, as I have, that haiku becomes a lens, not unlike a camera lens, through which we can best capture life's essential experiences, from the commonplace to the profound.