

HAIKU

An Anthology of Japanese Poems



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and AKIRA YAMAMOTO

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Illustration 1

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INTRODUCTION

HAIKU are now one of the best-known and most practiced forms of poetry in the world. Simple enough to be taught to children, they can also reward a lifetime of study and pursuit. With their evocative explorations of life and nature, they can also exhibit a delightful sense of playfulness and humor.

Called *haikai* until the twentieth century, haiku are usually defined as poems of 5-7-5 syllables with seasonal references. This definition is generally true of Japanese haiku before 1900, but it is less true since then with the development of experimental free-verse haiku and those without reference to season: for example, the poems of Santōka (1882–1940), who was well known for his terse and powerful free verse. Seasonal reference has also been less strict in *senryū*, the comic counterpart of haiku in which human affairs become the focus.

Freedom from syllabic restrictions is especially true for contemporary haiku composed in other languages. The changes are not surprising. English, for example, has a different rhythm from Japanese: English is “stress-timed” and Japanese “syllable-timed.” Thus, the same content can be said in fewer syllables in English. Take, for example, the most famous of all haiku, a verse by Bashō (1644–1694):

Furu ike ya
kawazu tobikomu
mizu no oto

Furu means “old,” *ike* means “pond or ponds,” and *ya* is an exclamatory particle, something like “ah.” *Kawazu* is a “frog or frogs”; *tobikomu*, “jump in”; *mizu*, “water”; *no*, the genitive “of”; and *oto*, “sound or sounds” (Japanese does not usually distinguish singular from plural). If using the singular, a literal translation would be:

Old pond—
a frog jumps in
the sound of water

Only the third of these lines matches the 5-7-5 formula, and the other lines would require “padding” to fit the usual definition:

[There is an] old pond—
[suddenly] a frog jumps in
the sound of water

This kind of “padding” tends to destroy the rhythm, simplicity, and clarity of haiku, so translations of 5-7-5-syllable Japanese poems are generally rendered with fewer syllables in English. Translators also have to choose whether to use singulars or plurals (such as *frog* or *frogs*, *pond* or *ponds*, and *sound* or *sounds*).

while in Japanese these distinctions are nicely indeterminate.

We have attempted to offer English translation as close to the Japanese original as possible, line-by-line. Sometimes a parallel English translation succeeds in conveying the sense of the original. This haiku by Issa provides an example:

Japanese

kasumu hi no (*mist day of*)
uwasa-suru yara (*gossip-do maybe*)
nobe no uma (*field of horse*)

Close Translation

Misty day—
they might be gossiping,
horses in the field

Sometimes the attempt at a parallel translation results in awkward English, and freer translation is necessary, as with this haiku by Buson:

Japanese

yoru no ran (*night of orchid*)
ka ni kakurete ya (*scent in hide wonder*)
hana shiroshi (*flower be=white*)

Close Translation

Evening orchid—
is it hidden in its scent?
the white of its flower

Freer Translation

Evening orchid—
the white of its flower
hidden in its scent

Other times a parallel translation doesn't have the impact that can be delivered by a freer translation, as in this haiku by an anonymous poet:

Japanese

mayoi-go no (*lost-child of*)
ono ga taiko de (*one's=own drum with*)
tazunerare (*be=searched=for*)

Close Translation

The lost child
with his own drum
is searched for

Freer Translation

Searching for
the lost child
with his own drum

Thus, the challenge for translators is to try to follow the Japanese word and line order without resulting in awkward English. While admirable, sometimes adhering to the original verses may make for weaker poems in English. Sometimes the languages are too different to make a close match without hurting the flow and even the meaning. However, when closer translations succeed, they are powerfully satisfying.

The fact that the spirit of the haiku can be effectively rendered in English translation indicates that the 5-7-5 syllabic count captures the outward rhythmic form of traditional Japanese haiku but does not necessarily define them. The strength of haiku is their ability to suggest and evoke rather than merely to describe. With or without the 5-7-5 formula and seasonal references, readers are invited to place themselves in a poetic mode and to explore nature as their imaginations permit.

Returning to Bashō's frog, what does the poem actually say? On the surface, not very much—one or more frogs jumping into one or more ponds and making one or more sounds. Yet this poem has fascinated people for more than three hundred years, and the reason why remains something of a mystery. Is it that it combines old (the pond) and new (the jumping)? A long time span and immediacy? Sight and sound? Serenity and the surprise of breaking it? Our ability to harmonize with the nature? All of these may evoke an experience that we can share in our own imaginations.

Whatever meanings it brings forth in readers, this haiku has not only been appreciated but also variously modeled after and sometimes even parodied in Japan, the latter suggesting that readers should not take it too seriously. To give a few examples, the Chinese-style poet-painter Kameda Bōsai (1752–1826) wrote:

Old pond—
after that time
no frog jumps in

while the Zen master Sengai Gibon (1750–1837) added new versions:

Old pond—
something has PLOP

just jumped in

Old pond—
Bashō jumps in
the sound of water

Bashō has become so famous for his haiku that this eighteenth-century *senryū* mocks the now self-conscious master himself:

Master Bashō,
at every plop
stops walking

In the modern world, new transformations of this poem keep appearing even across the ocean, including this haiku with an environmental undertone by Stephen Addiss:

Old pond paved over
into a parking lot—
one frog still singing

Perhaps one reason why haiku have become internationally popular in recent decades comes from our sensitivity to our surroundings, even to the development of towns and cities, often to the detriment of the natural world: poets have power to keep on singing the connection to nature in their new milieu.

Haiku in Japan

Although haiku is now a worldwide phenomenon, its roots stretch far back into Japan's history. The form itself began with poets sharing the composition of "linked verse" in the form of a series of five-line *waka* (5-7-5-7-7 syllables), a much older form of poem. *Waka* poets, working in sequence, noted that the 5-7-5 syllable sections could often stand alone. Separate couplets of 7-7 syllables were less appealing to the Japanese taste for asymmetry, but from the 5-7-5 links, haiku were born.

It is generally considered that Bashō was the poet who brought haiku into full flowering, deepening and enriching it and also utilizing haiku in accounts of his travels such as *Oku no hosomichi* (Narrow Road to the Interior). Bashō's pupils then continued his tradition of infusing seemingly simple haiku with evocative undertones, while continuing a sense of play that kept haiku from becoming the least bit ponderous.

The next two of the "three great masters" were Buson (1716-83), a major painter as well as poet who developed haiku-painting (*haiga*) to its height, and Issa (1763-1827), whose profound empathy with all living beings was a major feature of his poetry. With the abrupt advent of Western civilization to Japan in the late nineteenth century, haiku seemed to be facing an uncertain future, but

was revived by Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902) and his followers, and it has continued unabated until the present day.

Despite some historical changes over the centuries, certain features of Japanese life and thought have maintained themselves as integral features of the haiku spirit. For example, the native religion of Shintō reveres deities in nature, both cause and an effect of the Japanese love of trees, rocks, mountains, valley waterfalls, flowers, moss, animals, birds, insects, and so many more elements of the natural world. Significantly, haiku include human nature as an organic part of all of nature, as in the following poems about dragonflies by Shirao (1738–91) and the aforementioned Santōka, respectively:

The coming of autumn
is determined
by a red dragonfly

Dragonfly on a rock—
absorbed in
a daydream

In each case, the observation of an insect leads to a deeper consideration of our own perceptions, although neither poem has a “moral” or an obvious message. We may well ask who is judging, and who is daydreaming? In this sense, it could be said that every haiku is at least partially about human beings, if only the one who originally composed it and the one reading and experiencing it now. Perhaps all fine poems are expressions of experience rather than merely “things,” and haiku, above all, elicit our own participation as readers, almost as though the poem had disappeared and left us to determine our own experience.

There has been some controversy about the influence of Zen in haiku. Certainly some poets (such as Bashō) studied Zen, and a few were actually Zen masters (such as Sengai). Many other Japanese poets, however, followed other Buddhist sects, Shintō, or were completely secular, so we should be careful about claiming too much direct influence of Zen. In a broader sense, however, Japanese culture and the arts during the past seven centuries have been suffused with Zen influence, ranging from the tea ceremony and flower arranging to Noh theater, ink painting, and *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute) music. In particular, Zen’s insistence on the enlightenment of the ordinary world at the present moment, right here and right now, has both mirrored and influenced the haiku spirit. As Issa wrote:

Where there are people
there are flies, and
there are Buddhas

The Zen influence in haiku may need more examination, but it has touched Japanese culture so deeply that it can never be entirely absent. What Zen, other Buddhist sects, and Shintō all have in common with haiku is the harmony between

nature and humans.

Regarding This Volume

The three author-editors of the present volume have previously published a series of five books: *A Haiku Menagerie* (Weatherhill, 1992), *A Haiku Garden* (Weatherhill, 1996), *Haiku People* (Weatherhill, 1998), *Haiku Landscape* (Weatherhill, 2002), and *Haiku Humor* (Weatherhill, 2007). The haiku in this new book are excerpted from those books, with some modifications in translation along with newly added verses. This anthology includes a representative number of poems by each of the three great masters (Bashō, Buson, and Issa), a generous group of haiku by observant and creative poets ranging in time from the early fifteenth through the later twentieth centuries, and a sprinkling of anonymous comical *senryū*.

The poems are grouped into three categories: The Pulse of Nature, Human Voices, and Resonance and Reverberation. Each category moves along a time line not linearly but rather cyclically, reflecting natural life rhythms.

These poems are expressions not only of Japanese sensibilities but of age-old human responses to the world around us. We wish all of our readers the joy of experiencing this kaleidoscope of all living creatures and their multifaceted interactions with enveloping nature as expressed by the finest Japanese haiku and *senryū* poets.



Illustration 2

Opening their hearts
ice and water become
friends again

—TEISHITSU

The spring sun
shows its power
between snowfalls

—SHIGEYORI

Not in a hurry
to blossom—
plum tree at my gate

—ISSA

White plum blossoms
return to the withered tree—
moonlit night

—BUSON

The warbler
wipes its muddy feet
on plum blossoms

—ISSA

With each falling petal
they grow older—
plum branches

—BUSON

Dried grasses—
and just a few heat waves

rising an inch or two

—BASHŌ

Overflowing with love
the cat as coquettish
as a courtesan

—SAIMARO

Both partners
sport whiskers—
cats' love

—RAIZAN

Spring sun
in every pool of water—
lingering

—ISSA

Is the dawn, too,
still embraced by
hazy moon?

—CHŌSUI

In the shimmering haze
the cat mumbles something
in its sleep

—ISSA

Spring rain—
just enough to wet tiny shells
on the tiny beach

—BUSON



Illustration 3

The nurseryman
left behind
a butterfly

—RYŌTA

Again and again
stitching the rows of barley—
a butterfly

—SORA

A pheasant's tail
very gently brushes
the violets

—SHŪSHIKI-JO

Over the violets
a small breeze
passes by

—ONTEI

Each time the wind blows
the butterfly sits anew
on the willow

—BASHŌ

Spring chill—
above the rice paddies
rootless clouds

—HEKIGODŌ

Daybreak—
the whitefish whiten

only one inch

—BASHŌ

Domestic ducks
stretch their necks
hoping to see the world

—KŌJI

The warbler
dropped his hat—
a camellia

—BASHŌ

Crazed by flowers
surprised by the moon—
a butterfly

—CHORA

White camellias—
only the sound of their falling
moonlit night

—RANKŌ

Squeaking in response
to baby sparrows—
a nest of mice

—BASHŌ

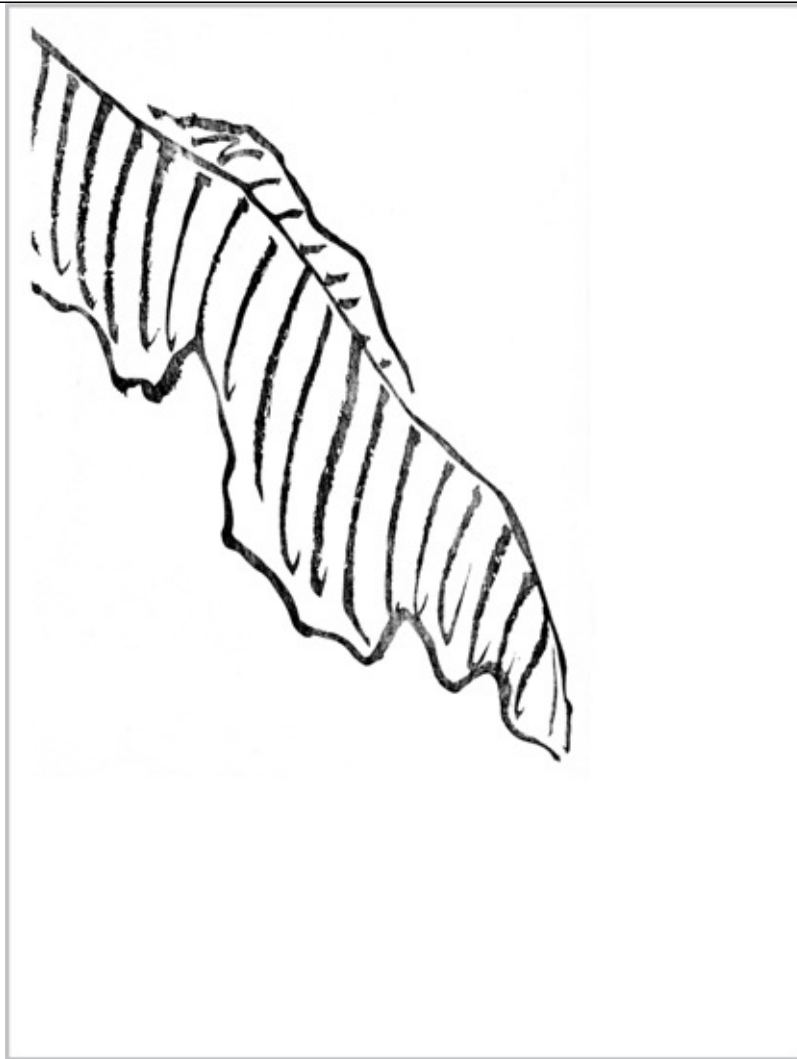


Illustration 4

Out from the darkness
back into the darkness—
affairs of the cat

—ISSA

Joyful at night
tranquil during the day—
spring rain

—CHORA

A camellia falls
spilling out
yesterday's rain

—BUSON

A hedge of thorns—
how skillfully the dog
wriggled under it!

—ISSA

Misty day—
they might be gossiping
horses in the field

—ISSA

An old well—
falling into its darkness
a camellia

—BUSON

Trampling on clouds,
inhaling the mist,

the skylark soars

—SHIKI

Crouching,
studying the clouds—
a frog

—CHIYO-JO

On the temple bell
perching and sleeping—
a butterfly

—BUSON

Could they be sutras?
in the temple well
frogs chant

—KANSETSU

Recited on and on,
the poems of the frogs
have too many syllables

—EJI

Bracing his feet
and offering up a song—
the frog

—SŌKAN

From the nostril
of the Great Buddha comes
a swallow

—ISSA



Illustration 5

On the brushwood gate
in place of a lock—
one snail

—ISSA

Sunlight
passes through a butterfly
asleep

—RANKŌ

With the power of non-attachment
floating on the water—
a frog

—JŌSŌ

Highlighting the blossoms,
clouded by blossoms—
the moon

—CHORA

Flower petals
set the mountain in motion—
cherry blossoms

—HŌITSU

On the surface
of petal-covered water—
frogs' eyes

—FŌSEI

The retreating shapes
of the passing spring—

wisteria

—KANA-JO

Spring passes—
the last reluctant
cherry blossoms

—BUSON

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