

The Discipline of Haiku

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If you were to stop the average person on the street and ask what a haiku was, he or she would likely say that it's a short poem from Japan. If they remember their grade-school English classes, they might even say that it's a poem about nature using a particular syllable count. And they'd be right, but also not-so-right.

crackling beach fire—
we hum in place of words
we can't recall

Most Westerners, if they know at all, think of haiku as having 5-7-5 syllables, yet that's not really accurate. There's a rhythm of 5-7-5 sounds (called "on" in Japanese, 音, pronounced as "own," but quicker), but that pattern applies to haiku in Japanese. And "on" are not to be confused with syllables—yet they routinely are. The word "haiku," for example, counts as two syllables in English, but *three* "on" in Japanese. Despite widespread misunderstandings, haiku doesn't need to be 5-7-5 syllables in English for the same reason that 100 yen does not equal 100 dollars. If you write 17 syllables in English, you're actually writing a lot longer poem than in the Japanese, with much more content, and thus the poem in English isn't as spare and elegant as a typical haiku in Japanese. Furthermore, the urban myth of 5-7-5 usually obscures more challenging aesthetic disciplines that are seldom taught in our schools.

toll booth lit for Christmas—
from my hand to hers
warm change

What are those other disciplines for traditional haiku? The three main strategies (among others) are the use of season words (*kigo*), cutting words (*kireji*), and objective sensory imagery. Visitors to Japan quickly experience how deeply almost everyone in the entire country values the seasons, especially in the arts. That appreciation extends to haiku poetry. Over centuries, Japanese haiku poets have classified seasonal events in almanacs known as *sajiki* (the word is both singular and plural, like the word *haiku*). These encyclopedias list thousands of words by season, such as *sakura* (cherry blossoms) or *kaeru* (frog) for spring, include sample poems for each season word, and botanical or zoological information, as well as information about whether the phenomenon in question typically occurs early or late in the season, or throughout. Dedicated haiku poets in Japan will carry a *sajiki* with them when they go on a *ginko* (haiku walk), dutifully checking it to see if they've used their *kigo* correctly (you can even get a *sajiki* as a dedicated electronic gadget, and as a smartphone app). So haiku is actually aiming at season words, not just nature, and these season words can include events that are entirely human, provided they are still

associated with a particular time of year. Usually a haiku has just one season word, which anchors the poem in time. The *kigo* also alludes to other poems that use the same season word. The discipline of season words cultivates a seasonal awareness that improves one's powers of poetic and natural observation. And it's far harder to use season words effectively than it is merely to count syllables.

spring breeze—
the pull of her hand
as we near the pet store

Another discipline is the *kireji*, or cutting word. In Japanese haiku (*kireji* are seldom used outside haiku), they're a sort of spoken punctuation, using up one or two syllables. They have no overt meaning but have the effect of saying "stop here" or "think about this before reading on," sometimes with overtones of surprise or contemplation. Examples include "ya," "keri," and "kana." A *kireji* creates two parts in the poem that resonate with one another (a haiku should never have three independent parts, a problem that's harder to avoid than beginners might think). In Bashō's famous frog poem, "*furuike ya / kawazu tobikomu / mizu no oto*," the cutting word "ya" ends the first line (I refer to lines, but in Japan, haiku is actually just *one* line, presented vertically; in English, three horizontal lines has become an effective norm). We have no cutting words in English, but we can create a cut or pause between two parts of a poem by using a dash or ellipsis, as in this translation of Bashō's poem: "old pond— / a frog jumps in / the sound of water." The point isn't simply to give your haiku two grammatical parts but to create an unexpected synergy between those two parts, like mixing baking soda and vinegar. With a good haiku, the two parts create something larger and perhaps surprising, by implication and reverberation. They become, in effect, $1 + 1 = 3$. In Bashō's haiku, the vitality of a spring frog contrasts with the staid maturity of the old pond, all of it crystallized into that sound of water and a sharp moment of perception. In the seventeenth century, Bashō's poem was revolutionary. Until then, Japanese and Chinese poems about frogs usually celebrated their croaking. This poem focused just on the frog's jump, and a different sort of sound. It might not have been scandalous, but this poem was fresher and more startling in its time than we might realize today, disrupting the "old pond" of prior tradition. Again, creating two parts, let alone creating unexpected synergies with them, is a much harder discipline than counting syllables.

first snow . . .
the children's hangers
clatter in the closet

A third discipline for traditional haiku is the use of objective sensory images. Haiku dwell in the five senses. American poet William Carlos Williams said "No ideas but in things." Haiku had been taking this truth to heart for centuries before he said it. Haiku are not about ideas, but about images—things you can see and taste and touch, things you can hear and smell. By presenting the thing itself, you enable readers to experience the thing for themselves, without commentary or judgment getting in the way. As soon as you start commenting on or judging what you experience, you start doing the reader's job. In short, for haiku, don't write about your feelings; instead, write about what *caused* your feelings. Western poets tend to want to analyze everything they write about, but the art of haiku is to take *out* most of that analysis so that an idea or emotion can be implied. As Dylan Thomas once said, "The best craftsmanship always leaves holes and gaps in the works of the poem so that something that is not in the poem can creep, crawl, flush, or thunder in." Haiku are therefore intuitive, and have also been called the "poetry of the noun"—focusing on the thing itself, not your interpretation of the thing. The two-part structure can help you create the implication necessary for haiku, in the "vacuum" produced between the two parts, but the two parts themselves consist of immediate and direct sensory images from the world around you. And they're most often just everyday things, too—Jack Kerouac said that haiku should be as simple as porridge. Yet they must be carefully selected and paired. Haiku is a chiefly objective form of poetry that creates

subjective effects. As a sort of “unfinished” poem, haiku requires the reader to finish it in his or her mind. Again, doing an effective job at crafting the two parts of the haiku with clear and immediate sensory images is far more disciplined than filling a syllable-counting bucket.

an old woolen sweater
taken yarn by yarn
from the snowbank

In Japan, major daily newspapers feature haiku columns on their front pages, and some ten million people regularly participate in monthly haiku meetings, called *kukai*, in which favourite poems are voted on by participants and by each group’s haiku masters. Issues of haiku journals such as *Hototogisu* (*Cuckoo*) present as many as 10,000 haiku *each month*. *Hototogisu* is the largest haiku journal in Japan, I believe, but the country is said to have close to 1,000 haiku magazines. Even the smallest of them features many hundreds of haiku. NHK presents haiku television programs, the Ito En tea company offers a \$5,000 top prize for a single haiku in its annual contest (attracting more than 1.5 million entries, with winning poems printed on cans of tea available nationwide as commonly as Coke or Pepsi), and haiku museums dot the country—an example is the Museum of Haiku Literature in Tokyo. While haiku may not be as ubiquitous in North America as it is in Japan, many people here do know of haiku. Even if all a person on the street knows is the “paint by numbers” misunderstanding of counting out syllables in a 5-7-5 pattern, at least he or she has heard of haiku, and will hopefully come to study and appreciate this challenging and disciplined art form at a deeper level. As the French philosopher Roland Barthes once said, “Haiku has this rather fantasmagorical property: that we always suppose we ourselves can write such things easily.” It’s actually not a big problem to write 5-7-5 syllables in English, but it won’t be a haiku if the poem doesn’t pay attention to other necessary targets. The true discipline of haiku is not in the counting of syllables at all.

first star—
a seashell held
to my baby’s ear

Postscript

I originally wrote an earlier draft of this postscript in 2009, in an email message to Deborah P Kolodji, but it seems fitting to add it here, even though the preceding article was written much later, in May of 2013.

Whenever I hear people say that they like the “discipline” of writing 5-7-5, I confess to wincing. Usually it’s haiku beginners who say this, although they don’t realize how green they seem to be. But a lot of us were there, and remember what it was like to think that way—not just to think in error that haiku is merely “5-7-5” and nothing more, but even to believe that such a pattern was a discipline. But really, it’s only a superficial discipline.

I remember years ago, maybe four or five years after I’d weaned myself off the 5-7-5 habit, that I began to see a change—that how I was writing haiku had a much deeper discipline to it. I don’t just mean making sure that each poem had a cut, a season word, and primarily objective imagery, although there’s tremendous discipline in that. Rather, in terms of form, I came to realize that each poem was creating its own form, and that each poem had to find its own rightness—and that this was a very difficult and disciplined thing to pursue. As Marcel Proust once said, “In fashioning a work of art we are by no means free, we do not choose how we shall make it but . . . it preexists us and therefore we are obliged, since it is both necessary and hidden, to do what we should have to do if it were a law of nature—that is to say, to discover it.”

I later learned Denise Levertov’s term of “organic form,” and how organic form differs not only from

set forms but also differs from so-called “free” form. The organic is not free. I was moved to write a paper on this subject for the 1995 Haiku North America conference in Toronto, a much shortened version of which I presented at the Haiku Chicago conference, a joint meeting of the Haiku Society of America and the Haiku International Association, also in 1995. Alas, due to computer upgrades and a crash, I seem to have lost both papers.

Writing organically, it seemed to me, was far more difficult than the superficial “discipline” of counting syllables. Syllable-counting is a relatively trivial “external” discipline, but writing haiku organically is a much more difficult “internal” discipline (internal to the poem, *and* to the poet). Many people think they’re done with a 5-7-5 poem (I won’t call it a haiku) when the syllables count out (although it still surprises me how many native English speakers miscount syllables). But if you take away that external structure, how do you know you’re done? It’s far more difficult, and shifts one’s focus (as a writer and a reader of these poems) onto content. And content is vastly more important.

This focus on content and an organic form go hand in hand. Form follows function, and form is never more than an extension of content, as we all know—or have at least heard. This is true of architecture, of longer poetry, and of haiku. It is why, whenever I hear someone say that they like the “discipline” of writing 5-7-5 haiku, I have the urge to wish them more information and experience, yet also to wish myself more patience and understanding, because they have lessons about haiku still to learn.

—7 September 2009, 3 July 2016
