

Notes on haiku

The Haiku Society of America defines haiku as a "poem in which Nature is linked to human nature." Cor van den Heuvel, a past president of the society, says haiku "is basically about living with intense awareness, about having an openness to the existence around us."

Haiku, one of our shortest poetic forms, is a poetry of moments, of verbal snapshots captured in a moment of clarity.

The haiku form arose in 16th century Japan. Traditionally, it consists of a rhymeless, 17 syllable poem conforming to a three line pattern of 5 - 7 - 5 syllables.¹ The haiku typically includes imagery from the natural world that indicates one of the four seasons. The form relies heavily on concise, compact imagery to convey its meaning, which can be thought of as a "zen moment" wherein the subject (perceiver) and object (perceived) are fused in a flash of poetic insight. The haiku is a means of recreating that moment and sharing it with the reader. Haiku doesn't explain that moment of zen; it merely presents it for observation.

Three Japanese poets are widely regarded as masters of the form: Basho, Buson, and Issa. Reckonings.net has published an instructive page on Basho (1644-1694), the most famous of Japanese haiku masters. Here are a few samples of his haiku:

Plates and bowls
dim in the twilight
the evening cool.

Breaking the silence
of an ancient pond,
a frog jumped into water --
a deep resonance.

¹ Syllables are word units representing a single sound of the voice, usually a vowel sound plus one or more consonants. Some words are one syllable only; others are multisyllabic.

Readings

fleas, lice
a horse peeing
near my pillow

Sick on a journey,
my dreams wander
the withered fields

Note the economy of expression in these poems, the compressed imagery, the focused perception on the minute details of life, fleeting moments of time, captured and shown on the page.

When you write haiku, you must develop an awareness for “haiku moments”: timeless, significant moments standing out against the stream of time and nature's passing seasons. Write what you perceive and resist the urge to explain the meaning or significance of that verbal snapshot. Although there are rules to follow when composing haiku (no more than 17 syllables per poem, arranged in three lines of 5-7-5 syllables), I encourage you to experiment. You can be loose with the syllabic structure while retaining the basic three or four line scheme. We are, after all, adapting a form that arose in a completely different language. Keep the tone light, airy, simple, and open, and let the poem suggest something deeper without spelling it out for the reader. Creating a good haiku is more likely the result of attentiveness, patience, and careful observation than inspiration.

To explore the world of haiku further, Google's directory contains plenty of links to related sites on the web. Haikuworld.org has a useful page for beginning haiku writers called Ten Tips for writing haiku. The online journal Short Stuff has a nice introduction to haiku form. At

www.haikuhut.com/Short%20Stuff%20II/Short%20Stuff%20Volume%20II%20Articles.htm

A close cousin of haiku is a form called **senryu**. Where haiku generally is a poem that deals with Nature in some way, senryu is about human nature and relationships, often with humorous overtones. Both haiku and senryu are Japanese short poem forms that seek to reveal a perceptive moment in a flash of insight. Here are some nice examples, selected from The Haiku Anthology, ed. Cor

Readings

van den Heuvel. New York: WW Norton, 1999.

Eric Amann

The circus tent
all folded up:
October mist

A night train passes:
pictures of the dead are trembling
on the mantelpiece

Winter burial:
a stone angel points his hand
at the empty sky

Nick Avis

longing to be near her
i remember my shirt
hanging in her closet

American Haiku

By Jack Keruoac

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"The American Haiku is not exactly the Japanese Haiku. The Japanese Haiku is strictly disciplined to seventeen syllables but since the language structure is different I don't think American Haikus (short three-line poems intended to be completely packed with Void of Whole) should worry about syllables because American speech is something again...bursting to pop.

Above all, a Haiku must be very simple and free of all poetic trickery and make a little picture and yet be as airy and graceful as a Vivaldi Pastorella."

Early morning yellow flowers,
thinking about
the drunkards of Mexico.

No telegram today
only more leaves
fell.

Nightfall,
boy smashing dandelions
with a stick.

Holding up my
purring cat to the moon
I sighed.

Drunk as a hoot owl,
writing letters
by thunderstorm.

Readings

Empty baseball field
a robin
hops along the bench.

All day long
wearing a hat
that wasn't on my head.

Crossing the football field
coming home from work -
the lonely businessman.

After the shower
among the drenched roses
the bird thrashing in the bath.

Snap your finger
stop the world -
rain falls harder.

Nightfall,
too dark to read the page
too cold.

Following each other
my cats stop
when it thunders.

Wash hung out
by moonlight
Friday night in May.

Readings

The bottoms of my shoes
are clean
from walking in the rain.

Glow worm
sleeping on this flower -
your light's on.