

## A Few Notes on Japanese Literary Forms by T.A. Carter

### Part One: A Little History of Haiku

In classical studies of haiku there are four pillars: Basho, Buson, Issa and Shiki. I always include a fifth pillar: Buddhist nun, Chiyo-ni.

**Matsuo Basho** was born in Iga province (Mie prefecture) in 1644. As a youth he was a companion of the son of his feudal lord in Kyoto. Here he learned the tea ceremony and studied *haikai* with the poet Kitamura Kigin. After the death of his young friend and patron, Basho moved to Edo (Tokyo) where he built his banana tree "basho" hermitage in Kukawara and worked seriously at writing *haikai*. Wishing to taste deeply of nature and of human life he observed closely, finally finding his own independent voice in a subjective type of haikai which revealed his feelings through sound, form, and image. His haikai are noted for their melancholy content (called *wabi*, a term from the tea ceremony applied to the aesthetic of humble things) and for their quiet tone (called *sabi* a term meaning the subdued elegance found in old, worn things). Through his life, Basho made many journeys in search of material for his haiku, at the same time becoming increasingly aware of nature. Of his many travel diaries, *Sarashina Kiko* (A Visit to Sarashina Village) and *Oku no Hosomichi* (The Narrow Road to the Deep North) are important for their nature essays and haiku, a form called haibun. He is called the Shakespeare of haiku because of the great contribution to the form. After the death of Basho (1694) the art of haiku declined momentarily, but was renewed and revived by Buson, Issa, and Shiki.

on a leafless bough  
a crow is perched --  
the autumn dusk

**Tanaguchi (or Yosano) Buson** (1715 - 1783) was born near Osaka. Little is known of his life, but his love of painting is revealed in his picturesque, objective imagery. In his personal reserve as an artist and his attention to craft, he might be compared to Alexander Pope, the neo-classical eighteenth-century poet. Feeling no necessity to reveal his own emotions, he nevertheless often wrote with a warm human touch.

an old man  
cutting pampas grass  
the wind behind him

If Buson resembles the Augustans, then **Kobayashi Issa** (1763 - 1827) may be termed a romantic. Born in the village of Kashiwaha, north of Tokyo, he was orphaned early in life. This tragedy, however, failed to embitter him. Rather, it gave him a sense of kinship with small animals and insect life. He is noted for the personal quality of his poetry, for his spirit of rebellion against poetic and religious convention, and above all, for the simple diction of his haiku and their depiction of ordinary human affairs.

slowly, slowly  
the snail climbs  
Mt. Fuji

Next in time to Issa comes the modern poet **Masaoka Shiki** (1867 -1902). Born in Matsuyama, Shiki worked for a newspaper after graduating from Tokyo University. Although he had earlier contracted tuberculosis, he fought in the Sino- Japanese War. Returning home with his illness aggravated, he worked from his sickbed on the renewal and improvement of waka (tanka) and haiku, editing the famous haiku magazine Hototogisu (Cuckoo). Shiki is the first poet to use the term "haiku". He gives new characteristics to the form -- greater variety of subject matter and increased objectivity.

barley drying  
in the front door  
old bamboo blinds hanging

**Chiyo-ni** is one of Japan's most celebrated female haiku poets, yet she is not that well known outside Japan. Her given name was not Chiyo-ni but rather Chiyo (meaning "a thousand years") It is only later in life, when she joined a monastery, that she added the suffix "ni" which means nun. She was born (1703) in the small town of Matto in the Kaga region. A student of Basho's disciple, she worked in an age when haiku was primarily a man's domain. As a poet, painter, and Buddhist nun, she created poems of seasonal beauty and human depth; her female "point of view" is revered for its honesty and luminosity.

woman's desire  
deeply rooted  
the wild violets

## **Part Two: Haiku**

I highly recommend reading these articles before you begin the practice of haiku. They can be found on Michael Dylan's website

: [www.graceguts.com](http://www.graceguts.com)

Once there, look for "Becoming a Haiku Poet" by Michael Dylan Welch (Canada/USA)

"What is a Haiku and What Isn't" by John J. Dunphy (USAS)

"How to Write a Haiku" by Naomi Beth Wakan (Canada)

"Haiku Lessons" by Allison Williams (librarian for the British Haiku Society)

### **Definition of haiku:**

Haiku is a short poem that uses imagistic language to convey the essence of an experience (an aha! moment) of nature or a season, intuitively linked to the human condition. (a short poem about "just" the human condition is called a senryu)

**Guidelines:** Here are a few habits to follow

- 1) Remember, a haiku has two parts.
- 2) Haiku have seasonal references. You do this by using a kigo (a Japanese word that means "reference to a season" i.e. tulip for spring; ice storm for winter; full moon for autumn; rose for summer.
- 3) Compose your haiku in three lines ( a fragment for one line and a phrase for two lines)
- 4) Use seventeen syllables or fewer: first line - five syllables or fewer; second line - seven syllables or fewer : third line - five syllables or fewer. Remember it is the moment, not the syllable count that matters most.
- 5) Separate the two parts of the haiku with an em dash, a semi colon, or an ellipsis. Later you might remove all punctuation. This is a style choice.
- 6) you don't need capital letters or end punctuation.
- 7) Stay in present tense.

## **Techniques for composing haiku:**

- 1) comparing images
- 2) contrasting images
- 3) associating images
- 4) use word play
- 5) gendai (modern or experimental)
- 6) one line haiku or monolu
- 7) "shasei" or "sketch from life"
- 8) concrete haiku
- 9) narrowing the focus
- 10) using mystery (Yugen)
- 11) using sabi (a veneration for that which is old and well worn)
- 12) using wabi (the aesthetic of humble things)

## **Haiku Journals:**

*Acorn*

*Blithe Spirit*

*Bottle Rockets*

*Heron's Nest*

*Haiku Canada Review*

*South by Southwest*

*Modern Haiku*

*Prune Juice (senryu)*

## Haiku websites:

[www.haikucanada.org](http://www.haikucanada.org) This is the official site for Haiku Canada with events, conferences, resources.

[www.vcbf.ca](http://www.vcbf.ca) This is the site for the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival. They sponsor a Haiku Invitational Contest each year. Try entering, it's free!

[www.haikuhabit.com](http://www.haikuhabit.com)

[www.hsa.org](http://www.hsa.org) This is the site for the Haiku Society of America with many regional resources and information

[www.thf.com](http://www.thf.com) The Haiku Foundation has essays, examples of haiku, interesting projects, and poet summaries. Everything there is to know about what's going on in the haiku world today.

[www.simplyhaiku.com](http://www.simplyhaiku.com)

[www.dailyhaiku.com](http://www.dailyhaiku.com)

## Books:

*Haiku: A Poet's Guide* by Lee Gurga

*Haiku: Asian Arts and Crafts for Creative Kids* by Patricia Donegan

*Red Moon Anthologies* Jim Kacian and others (annually)

*Light Verse from the Floating World* by Makoto Ueda

*Lighting the Global Lantern: A Teacher's Guide to Writing Haiku and Related Literary Forms* by Terry Ann Carter (available on [amazon.ca](http://amazon.ca))

### **Part Three: Other Japanese Literary Forms ( Haibun, Tanka, and Haiga)**

#### **Definition of haibun:**

Now that you know something about writing haiku, it is time to take the next step. Combining prose and haiku results in a Japanese literary form called haibun. If a haiku is an insight into a moment of experience, a haibun tells the story or narrative of how someone came to have that insight. A haibun tells the story about something you saw or did or imagined. It is important to remember that the haiku that follows the narrative should illustrate the point of your prose or extend the prose -- it does not encapsulate what has been written. In haibun, the reader is moved by the interrelationship between the prose writing and the haiku. The poetry arises from the link and shift in tone and palette between the prose and the haiku.

#### **Haibun techniques:**

- 1) story telling
- 2) travel writing
- 3) personal essay
- 4) diary
- 5) poetry

#### **Haibun resources:**

*Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Matsuo Basho

*The Spring of My Life* by Issa

*Japanese Poetic Diaries*, ed. Earl Minor

*Journey to the Interior: American Versions of Haibun* by Bruce Ross

*On the Road to Naropa: My Love Affair with Jack Kerouac (A Haibun Memoir)* by T.A. Carter

*A Boy's Seasons: A Memoir* by Cor van den Heuvel

## Definition of Tanka:

In *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku*, William J. Higginson devotes an entire chapter to tanka that he calls "Before Haiku. Tanka was, in fact, an older poetic form, or song, dating back to the Nara through Heian Periods in Japan. Here you will find a history of this poetic form with accounts of Shiki, Mokichi, and Yosano Akiko. Tanka is a highly personal and emotional poetry; in Japanese, it is written in five lines or phrases in a pattern of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. Kozue Uzawa, editor of *Gusts: Contemporary Tanka*, explains that English language tanka should come closer to 20 syllables. She invites us to write directly and express our feelings freely.

And, Sometimes in Me, Tanka Sequence (T.A. Carter)

Home from China  
each rounded leaf  
reminds me of moon gates  
this summer night  
fanning against my skin

Where can I find  
a bamboo bird cage  
like those in Shanghai markets  
the slow scuttle  
of clouds

Finally finding  
my bamboo cage  
in an antique shop  
the owner wearing  
new red shoes

Nothing lives  
in the wooden cage  
only a memory  
of a creature  
who sang before dawn

And, sometimes in me  
a great desire  
to lift open  
the little door  
let something fly free

(The only punctuation in tanka is a capital letter at the beginning)

### **Tanka resources:**

#### **Journals:**

*American Tanka*

*bottle rockets*

*Eucalypt*

*Gusts: A Journal of Contemporary Tanka*

*Lilliput Review*

*Modern English Tanka*

*Moonset*



*Paper Wasp*

*red lights*

*Snapshot Press*

*Ribbons (Tanka Society of America)*

### **Books:**

*Kokinshu: A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern*, trans. by Laurel Rasplica

*Modern Japanese Tanka* by Makoto Ueda

*Footsteps in the Fog* by Michael Dylan Welch

*Wind Five Folded* ed. Jane and Werner Reichhold

### **Definition of haiga:**

Poetry and paintings on the same page had long been a tradition in China, Japan, and Korea. Haiku was painted down the page using a calligraphy brush and sumi-e ink. Haiga is a traditional art form composed of brush painting and calligraphy of the haiku (poem). Today haiga artists create with drawings, paintings, photographs, and digital technology -- marrying image and text so that each is independent of the other yet producing an artwork mysteriously "new".

### **Resources:**

[www.haigaonline.com](http://www.haigaonline.com)

Haiga: Japanese art and poetry is a website maintained by Ray Rasmussen and the World Haiku Club.

[www.dailyhaiga.com](http://www.dailyhaiga.com)

Of note: My guidebook *Lighting the Global Lantern: A Teacher's Guide to Writing Haiku and Related literary Forms* contains chapters on each of these forms (haiku, senryu, tanka, haibun and haiga with examples, and more resources.

-----

Terry Ann Carter

poet, paper artist

home: 250-474-0203

cell: 250-208-8441

Web | [terryanncarter.com](http://terryanncarter.com)

FB | TerryAnnCarter

*Written for Wordstorm Society of the Arts, 2024*