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俳句

READINGS

THE BRITISH MUSEUM

HAIKU

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INTRODUCTION

ONE CAN *know* the main facts about Japanese haiku without having much feeling for them; and one can *feel* quite deeply about haiku without knowing many facts – intuition sometimes supplies important insights. But we imagine our reader to be someone who wants to both know something and feel something about haiku. This introduction therefore starts with an outline of the history and development of haiku in Japan, and moves on to the appreciation of haiku's aesthetic qualities.

The history and development of haiku poetry

IN JAPANESE literature we recognise certain poems as haiku as far back as the 12th century, but it was not until the end of the 19th century that the term 'haiku' was actually applied to any of these poems from the seven hundred intervening years. This is because the haiku gradually evolved almost as a by-product of other poetic activities, in particular *renga*.

Renga has complex rules, governing both form and content. Rather like an erudite 'party game', a *renga* was composed by a group who spent a period of time together, hours at least, with a leader who set the tone for the composition and decided which verses were acceptable. The final product was a chain of stanzas, with alternating lengths of seventeen and fourteen syllables.

Seventeen-syllable links normally consist of three phrases: a five-syllable phrase followed by one of seven syllables, and then five again. Fourteen-syllable links break down into only two phrases each of seven syllables. The fascination of five-syllable and seven-syllable phrases for the

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Japanese goes back to the Heian period (AD 794–1185) and is innate to the Japanese language. R.H. Blyth (1898–1964), the British haiku scholar, speculated that their original appeal was ‘partly because the repetition of five and the repetition of seven expressed the regularity of nature, and the alternation of five and seven its irregularity’.

As to content, *renga* poets follow strict rules, specifying topics that must or must not appear at various points in the chain. For example, Bashō stipulated that the moon should be mentioned three times in thirty-six links. But beyond the formal structure, *renga* relies for its effect on ‘fragrance’: each succeeding link should yield some aftermath of the one preceding it, but shift the context, and the completed *renga* should have a beginning, a middle, and a finale.

The first link, known as the *hokku*, was of crucial importance, setting the tone and style of language, the mood, and the seasonal context of the whole. It was often of higher quality, perhaps because planned carefully in advance, than the more spontaneous stanzas that followed it. It might be detached from the rest of the *renga* and put into an anthology, and so it acquired an independent existence. It was but a step from this to the increasingly common practice of creating *hokku* which were intended from the outset to be free-standing.

Individual poets contributed to the transition from *renga* to haiku. Sōgi (1421–1502) insisted that *renga* should be imbued with lofty thought (*yūgen*). Sōkan (d. 1539/40) developed a more ‘popular’ style of *renga*, known as *haikai no renga*, which was less formal and more accessible to ordinary people. He also emphasised sincerity. In the late 17th century several poets, above all Bashō and Onitsura, redeemed the *haikai no renga* which had become increasingly mundane and tasteless. Bashō’s poetics, emphasising such virtues as directness, truthfulness and a light touch, and finding spiritual moments in the everyday lives of common people and their engagement with nature,

have influenced generations of haiku writers ever since.

Although other great masters arose – notably Buson (1716–84) and Issa (1762–1826), making their reputations on the basis of individual *hokku*, not as *renga* masters – both forms had once more degenerated by the second half of the 19th century; and with the opening up of Japan to the world in the Meiji period after 1868, the influence of Western poetry threatened the future of these traditional Japanese poetic forms.

Onto this literary scene came the reformist critic and poet, Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), who awarded literary status only to the independent *hokku* and began to use the term 'haiku' to describe the self-sufficient seventeen-syllable poem. Shiki believed that the objective style of sketching practised by certain Western artists offered hope for the regeneration of haiku, inventing for this the term *shasei* ('verbal sketching'). He insisted that haiku about actual things and events in our daily lives were generally superior to anything the imagination could invent. Upon Shiki's death, haiku poets in Japan became divided between those who thought his work of reform was complete, and those who saw it as an ongoing process: groups calling themselves 'traditionalists', 'modernists' and 'avant-gardistes' have formed, all represented in this anthology alongside the 'classical' writers.

Further information about the development of Japanese haiku may be gleaned from the Biographical Notes on pp. 85–8.

The formal characteristics of Japanese haiku

WHEN THE strictest rules are observed, there are three requirements of a Japanese haiku:

BREVITY AND COMPRESSION: a haiku should consist only of essential words, making a total of *approximately* seventeen syllables. (The Japanese idea

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of a syllable is quite different from that of someone speaking a European language; for example, the letter n may count as a separate syllable, whilst a syllable containing a long vowel, indicated by a macron, e.g. ō, counts as two.) Sometimes a number of syllables smaller or larger than seventeen seems either 'sufficient' or 'necessary'. Here are some examples of counts:

ō ō to (5) *iedo tataku ya* (7) *yuki no mon* (5) (= 17 in total) (Kyorai)
ichinichi mono iwazu nami oto (= 13) (Santōka)

SEASONAL FEELING: it should be possible to place the haiku in one of the five seasons of the year (five, because in Japan the New Year is reckoned to be a season in its own right). One key word, known as a *kigo*, acts as a general evocation of nature or human activities at this time of year. Poets who wish to observe this tradition carry about with them an almanac known as a *saijiki*, which they use to find season words appropriate to the time of composition. For example, on its own the word 'moon' (*tsuki* in Japanese) evokes an autumnal scene – the full harvest moon. The Japanese reader therefore understands the following as an autumn poem:

imo wo niru *nabe no naka made* *tsukiyo kana* (Kyoriku)
even to the saucepan where potatoes are boiling a moonlit night

If another time of year is intended, the poet will need to specify it – 'the spring moon', 'the summer moon', etc.

Nowadays, when many of us do not live close to nature, wider interests need to be represented in haiku, so some compilers of *saijiki* include a category of 'seasonless haiku' or 'human affairs'. Lyrical haiku about the moon and cherry blossom retain their popularity, but haiku has long had a place also for topics as sombre as homelessness and illness.

A 'CUTTING WORD', called a *kireji*, is also required. This may be placed at the end of any of the three lines. If it is at the end of the first or second line, it acts as a combination of lacuna and ligature, dividing the poem into two 'unequal halves' ('unequal' in that one section is of twelve syllables and the other of only five, yet 'halves' because they achieve a degree of parity). Its use indicates to the reader a need for reflection, or invests the poem with a certain mood. For example, in the following haiku by Shiki, *ya* at the end of the first line is the *kireji*. It has no 'meaning' other than to create a pregnant pause and a sense of questioning expectation about what may be about to follow.

<i>harusame ya</i>	<i>kasa takabiku ni</i>	<i>watashibune</i>
spring rain –	umbrellas up and down	in the ferry boat

A *kireji* at the very end indicates attitude without, of course, creating a pause. In the following, by Bashō, *kana* is the cutting word. It heightens the emotion by signalling the poet's wonder and surprise at what he has just observed.

<i>kagerō no</i>	<i>waga kata ni tatsu</i>	<i>kamiko kana</i>
heat waves	shimmer on the shoulders	of my paper robe

Appreciating haiku

WITH THE season word unlocking the reader's own personal store of experience, and the cutting word inviting the reader to search for unstated connections, the haiku has been styled 'the half-said thing' (Bashō again: 'Is there any good in saying everything?'). The appreciation of haiku is a matter of collaboration between poet and reader, the one (to use a

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metaphor from photography) exposing something to the light, and the other developing it. As well as being half-stated, it is also under-stated, with sparing resort to the eye-catching metaphor or the subjective attribute, which might be said to be typical of much Western poetry. Haiku aims to be plain and simple, but at the same time subtle.

There is a shared understanding behind virtually all haiku that the transience of life and earthly things is made acceptable because there are also cycles of events (the seasons of the year, the wheel of human life) which turn and return. There may therefore be a sort of compact between poets and their audiences, an implicit understanding that 'every day is a good day', or at least that there is always some detail in the life going on around us which is worthy of our regard, respect and possibly celebration. Awareness and acceptance are hallmarks of haiku and they result in an affirmative attitude to, for example, solitude (without melancholy), loss, and even pain. This outlook permeates the haiku in this book.

How this selection was made

THE PICTURES in this book – all from the excellent collection of Japanese art in The British Museum – originally had no direct connection with the poems printed next to them. They do however make use of a common fund of images, sometimes having other qualities which they share with haiku: elimination of the inessential, spontaneity, positive use of vacant space, an asymmetrical balance. We have attempted to represent different styles of haiku, as well as specimens which interact in an interesting way with the accompanying pictures and with each other. It was appropriate to observe the seasonal arrangement of haiku used in a Japanese anthology, but the few New Year haiku are placed at the end of winter, rather than in the orthodox first position, before spring (in Japan the New

Year used to be in February). The translations are from a variety of hands (see Acknowledgements).

Divisions in both the calligraphy and transliterated versions of haiku are arbitrary. The calligraphy aims to please the eye, the transliteration to show how the haiku might be phrased when read aloud. If both are divided into three sections, they may be taken to coincide, but it would have been unsatisfactory to make this arrangement a general rule.

Haiku as world poetry

HAIKU has now been adopted, usually with some necessary modifications, as a poetic form in many of the world's languages and literatures (see the suggestions for Further Reading and the list of Resources on pp. 89–90).

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ganjitsu ya kinō ni tōki asaborake

the dawn of New Year's Day –
yesterday
how far off!

Ichiku

昨日に遠き

元日や

朝ぼらけ

Eishōsai Chōki, New Year Sunrise,
c. 1795; woodblock.

Haiku Traffic Signs Bring Poetry To NYC Streets

by NPR STAFF

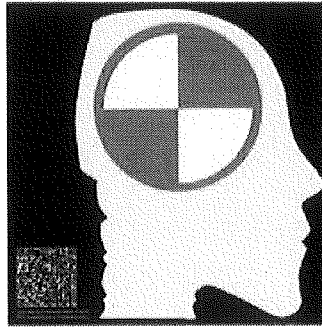
December 3, 2011

text size **A A A**

If you're walking or biking around New York City this weekend you might look up at a busy intersection and see signs like these:



**She walks in beauty
Like the night. Maybe that's why
Drivers can't see her.**



**Aggressive driver.
Aggressive pedestrian.
Two crash test dummies.**



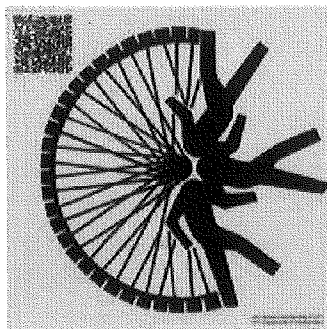
**Oncoming cars rush
Each a 3-ton bullet.
And you, flesh and bone.**

John Morse/NYC DOT

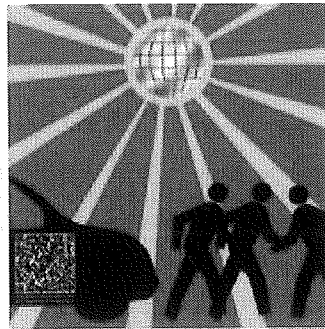
Traffic warning street signs written as haiku are appearing on poles around the five boroughs, posted by the New York City Department of Transportation. The poems and accompanying artwork were created by artist John Morse. There are 12 designs in all, 10 in English and two in Spanish.

"Poetry has a lot of power," Morse tells NPR's Scott Simon. "If you say to people: 'Walk.' 'Don't walk.' Or, 'Look both ways.' If you can tweak it just a bit — and poetry does that — the device gives these simple words power."

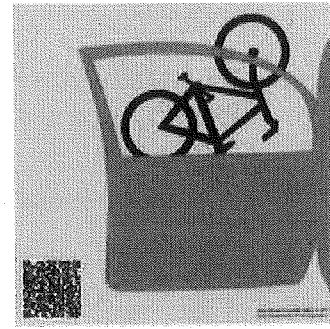
Take, for example, these signs that urge pedestrians, drivers and bikers to walk, drive and ride responsibly:



**Cyclist writes screenplay
Plot features bike lane drama
How pedestrian**



**Cars crossing sidewalk:
Worst New York City hotspot
To run into friends**



**Car stops near bike lane
Cyclist entering raffle
Unwanted door prize**

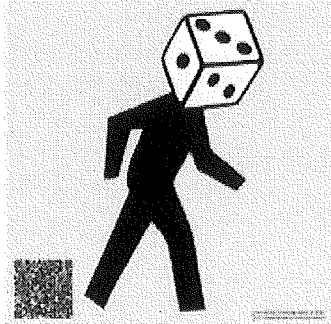
John Morse/NYC DOT

Accidents aren't funny, but Morse's artful treatment gets a serious message across in a powerful way. "It's fun because it's dreadfully serious — the subject," Morse says. "And yet, you don't have to bang people

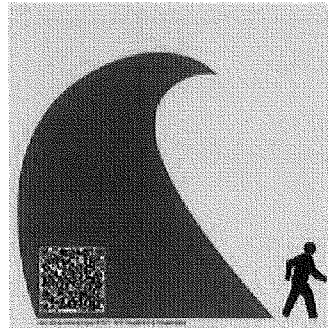
over the head."

The bold colors and clever words take signs that would otherwise fade into the background into the forefront.

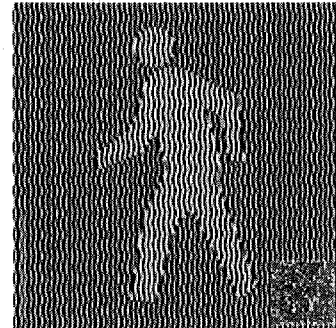
"There's a lot of visual clutter ... all around us," Morse says. "So the idea is to bring something to the streetscape that might catch someone's eye."



**Too averse to risk
To chance the lottery, yet
Steps into traffic**



**8 million swimming,
The traffic rolling like waves.
Watch for undertow.**



**Imagine a world
Where your every move matters.
Welcome to that world.**

John Morse/NYC DOT

Morse says one delightful and unexpected consequence of the project is that it has brought some haiku poets out of the woodwork. "One of the joys of doing this sort of thing is how many people have responded to it with their own haiku," Morse says. "There's just a plethora of haiku coming out. It's so exciting."



Basho

Published: February 2008

On the Poet's Trail

Footsteps fall softly
Following the path
Of Japan's haiku master.

By Howard Norman

"Each day is a journey, and the journey itself home," the poet Matsuo Basho wrote more than 300 years ago in the first entry of his masterpiece, *Oku no Hosomichi*, or *Narrow Road to a Far Province*. The words are on my mind as I prepare to walk in the footsteps of this revered poet, along his narrow road—the 1,200-mile route he followed through Japan in 1689. I confess that even to imagine doing so is a bit daunting. My late friend Helen Tanizaki, a linguist born and raised in Kyoto, told me, "Everyone I went to school with could recite at least one of Basho's poems by heart. He was the first writer we read in any exciting or serious way." Today thousands of people pilgrimage to Basho's birthplace and burial shrine and travel parts of Basho's Trail. After three centuries his *Narrow Road*, in print in English and many other languages, still speaks to readers around the world.

Given the pernicious clamor and uncertainties of our own times, it's easy for a modern reader to identify with the vague unease that Basho sometimes complained of. Whatever its source—Basho lived a turbulent life in a changing Japan—his melancholy was an intensifying element in much of his writing and an important part of what, in the end, propelled him on his journeys.

Few details are known about Basho's early life, but he is thought to have been born in 1644 in the castle town of Ueno, southeast of Kyoto. His father, a minor samurai, may have earned his keep teaching

children to write. Many of Basho's siblings probably became farmers.

Basho, however, acquired a taste for literature, perhaps from the son of the local lord, whose service he joined. He learned the craft of poetry from Kigin, a prominent Kyoto poet, and early in his life was exposed to two lasting influences: Chinese poetry and the tenets of Taoism. After his master died, Basho began spending time in Kyoto, practicing a form called *haikai*, consisting of linked verses.

In Basho's time, the first verse in *haikai* was evolving into a poetic idiom of its own—haiku, whose unrhymed phrases of five, seven, and five syllables are meant to capture the essence of nature. Basho published his first haiku under various names, each having some personal significance. One, Tosei, or "green peach," was an homage to the Chinese poet Li Po ("white plum").

In his late 20s Basho moved to Edo (now old Tokyo), a newly established city in great social flux, with a fast-growing population, robust trade, and, for Basho, literary opportunity. Within a few years he had gathered the coterie of students and patrons who formed what came to be known as the Basho School.

In 1680 one of his students built the poet a small house near the River Sumida, and soon after, when another presented him with a stock of *basho* tree (a species of banana), the poet started writing under the name that has endured: Basho. Credible accounts of his life hold that during this period he was plagued with spiritual doubt and took up the study of Zen Buddhism. His despair only deepened in 1682, when his house burned to the ground in a fire that obliterated much of Edo. He wrote:

*Tired of cherry,
Tired of this whole world,
I sit facing muddy sake
And black rice.*

In 1684 Basho made a months-long journey westward from Edo, which occasioned his first travel account, *Journal of a Weather-Beaten Skeleton*. In Basho's day travel was by foot and lodging was primitive. But despite these rigors he set out again in 1687 and a third time in 1687-1688, journeys recounted in *Kashima Journal* and *Manuscript in a Knapsack*. Both were written in a genre that Basho profoundly refined—*haibun*, a mixture of haiku and prose. The poetic travel works and the strenuous sojourns that inspired them added luster to Basho's reputation.

Yet in the autumn of 1688, in his mid-40s, Basho confided to friends that he still felt the world was too much with him. Exhausted from the incessant demands of students and of his literary celebrity, he said that he “felt the breezes from the afterlife cross his face.” He began planning a pilgrimage to sites important for their literary, religious, or military history—places he wanted to see before he died. He intended to leave that winter, but his friends, worried about his frail health, begged him to wait until spring.

Finally, in May 1689, accompanied by his friend and disciple Sora and carrying only a backpack, writing materials, and changes of clothing, Basho set out, determined yet again to become a *hyohakusha*—“one who moves without direction.” He walked for five months through the uplands and lowlands, villages, and mountains north of Edo and along the shores of the Sea of Japan. It was this wonderfully episodic sojourning that produced his masterwork, *Narrow Road to a Far Province*. “It was as if the very soul of Japan had itself written it,” said the early 20th-century Buddhist poet Miyazawa Kenji.

The book is a spiritual journey, synonymous with taking a Buddhist path, shedding all worldly belongings and casting fate to the winds. But the physical journey had a practical side: Basho made his living in part as a teacher, and as he traveled, any number of far-flung disciples were happy to host the master and receive lessons in poetry.

In 1694, the year of Basho’s death, the famed calligrapher Soryu wrote in an epilogue to the *Narrow Road*: “Once had my raincoat on, eager to go on a like journey, and then again content to sit imagining those rare sights. What a hoard of feelings, Kojin jewels, has his brush depicted! Such a journey! Such a man!”

In the intervening centuries, Basho has become many things to many people—bohemian sage, outsider artist, consummate wayfarer, beatific saint, and above all a poet for the ages. In his *Narrow Road*, Basho seamlessly plaits together self-deprecating humor, logistical detail, Buddhist compliance, painterly description, and even raunchy complaint (“Fleas and lice biting; / Awake all night / A horse pissing close to my ear”). At the same time, his book provides a kind of timeless spiritual map for the traveler. Helen Tanizaki once characterized Basho this way: “He’s like a quirky philosopher tour-guide who pretty much leaves readers alone to experience traveling in those remote places for themselves. Rather than trying to account for things, he just feels the obligation to take note of them, a vast striving for connection.”

As I put on my own raincoat and prepare to walk in Basho's footsteps, I harbor no delusions that I am about to travel through an ancient Japan like that of the *Narrow Road*. As the scholar Donald Keene reported, "Each place it describes is totally transformed. Senju, the first leg of Basho's journey, is now a bustling commercial district, and Soka, where he spent his first night on the road, contains a mammoth housing development. But the truth of *The Narrow Road* ... will survive such changes."

Former poet laureate Robert Hass paraphrases Basho this way: "Avoid adjectives of scale, you will love the world more and desire it less." Following that admonition, I have neither large nor small expectations. I do know that even today, eternal landscapes and age-old shrines can be found along Basho's route, connecting an open-minded traveler to the past in ways no human industry can impede. Besides, beauty is found not only in what you observe with compassionate perspicacity but also in how you come to know yourself when alone. Meandering along farmland roads on foot or riding in a car in 21st-century Japan, staying the night in a traditional inn near mount Gassan or in a business hotel in Tokyo, I will seek refuge in the indispensable idea of Basho.

Basho is said to have told a student that he often "held forth" with great Chinese and Japanese poets of the past, calling on such occasion a "conversation with ghost and ghost-to-be." For over a year now I've been thinking of my journey as a kind of portable séance, an ongoing dialogue with Matsuo Basho. I will pray for decent weather (I'll be traveling during typhoon season), good moon viewing, and quiet hours to fill notebooks. And step by step I will happily define myself as a ghost-to-be.

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