

BEGINNING TO WRITE HAIKU

Over the past four hundred years haiku writing has become a recognized form of poetry in Japan. For some people haiku is an end in itself. For others it is part of a spiritual discipline or a means to heighten awareness of nature. Still others write haiku because it is simply waiting there to be written. The best way to understand haiku is to write some haiku.

A second-grade teacher in North Carolina read some haiku to her class, sent them outside to observe nature, called them back in and asked them to write. One of her eight-year-olds handed this in,

*In the quiet forest
watching the squirrels play games
while the flowers bloom.*

This little poet is on her way! In Japan there are many rules and conventions for haiku. There are a number of schools, each with its own particular approach. I think it is important to bind ourselves by some rules. For those who look to haiku as a tool for slowing down, becoming more in tune with life, more aware, more whole, I suggest starting with only three rules;

1. **Write a poem with seventeen syllables divided into three lines. The first line has five syllables, the second has seven, the third has five.**
2. **Let the poem reflect the season of the year.**
3. **Don't be clever!**

1. Seventeen Syllables – Three Lines

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When Japanese is translated into English, it is sometimes put into four lines rather than three. At other times it goes into two lines. Also, haiku is an outgrowth of the Japanese language, which has no article and practically no pronouns. There is no punctuation in Japanese haiku. Punctuation is, to some extent, replaced by words called kireji. These differences have led some to suggest that haiku is not an appropriate form of English writing. Despite all this, the writing of haiku in English has proved a rich experience for many people.

It is probable that the majority of adult haiku poets in North America do not follow the 5-7-5 form. They attempt to capture and communicate a transcendent moment and to do so they use flowing and flexible forms. It is also sometimes argued that 5-7-5 often leads to extra, unneeded, words. I find I am tempted to take myself too seriously if I discard 5-7-5 but I have read and appreciated very wonderful haiku in flexible form.

The person who introduced me to haiku used a name which was translated "Seventeen Stepping-Stones." She would say:

Arrange these stones in three lines (five syllables, seven syllables, five syllables) and you may walk into many an interesting river. You should let each line express separate parts of your haiku. Do not express two thoughts which meet in the middle of the second line.

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2. Reflect the Season

Haiku is a form of listening. Therefore, it is not a mental construction as much as it is an attempt to overcome our separateness from our natural surroundings. Write about the world's relationship to us. Nothing can stop you if you prefer to look at your individual problems or achievements, but if you are attempting to overcome your separateness you will find it helpful to always have the poem indicate the season of the year. Sometimes this is done by simply naming the season or month:

*Through the long summer
the tall brown meadow grass
will bow and bow and bow.*

At other times the season is just present in the nature of the poem.

*Apple blossom smell,
soft shadows of unseen birds,
sound of buzzing bees.*

All the rules are simply to help us slow down and listen. We should not be concerned about creating a "great poem."

The world is our classroom; we need to sit and wait for our teacher. In the seventeenth century, Matsuo Basho gave some strong advice to haiku writers:

*Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn. Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one — when you have plunged deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden glimmering there. However well phrased your poetry may be, if your feeling is not natural — if the object and yourself are separate — then your poetry is not true poetry but merely your subjective counterfeit. [With permission from Matsuo Basho, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, translated and with an introduction by Nobuyuki Yuasa (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966) 33.]*

3. Don't Be Clever

The third rule follows on Basho's advice. Be yourself; avoid the temptation to impress yourself or anyone else. In this way there is no such thing as a good or bad haiku. The only question is whether or not it is honest. In this sense, poetry is simply being yourself.

There is another seventeen-syllable form of poetry called senryu. It was designed to let people show how clever they are at commenting upon the human condition. But this is not haiku as I am thinking of it.

In order to encourage authenticity, haiku masters suggested a number of guidelines. Some of them were:

- Use everyday language.
- Look for haiku in small ordinary experiences.
- Try to discover the unity of all around you and within you.
- Say things in a simple way and develop one thought at a time. Be natural. Do not write for an audience.

Also remember, if you are tenaciously holding on to an idea and trying to squeeze it into 17 syllables, there is probably too much of you in the poem. It may be hard to accept until you have written haiku for a while, but honest poems just seem to flow naturally like water between rocks. If you are trying too hard, you are not listening.