

Haiku Takes Wing

By Emiko Miyashita



Author Emiko Miyashita

In our dark cellar
The potatoes look at me
Through their many eyes

Colin Enderud, 13, Canada
(*Haiku by Children*, 1997)

Insects crawl along
Like cars on a busy road
Going to their home

Timothy Thorpe, 7, England
(*Haiku by Children*, 1999)

My hair done
For the festival
My heart starts dancing

Kanami Jinba, 10, Japan
(*Impressions of Festivals*, 2013)

まつりがみ結ってころがおどり出す

神馬佳奈美 10才

Here are three haiku from anthologies of the World Children's Haiku Contest conducted by the JAL Foundation every other year since 1990. Colin will turn 30 years old in 2014. His experience in the dark cellar is still vivid in his haiku. So is Timothy's observation. He will soon be 22 years old. Kanami's excitement is shared by many of us, recalling to us the joys and the incidental details of festival days.

Haiku is a short form of poetry that can be written and appreciated by people not only in Japan, where it originated, but throughout the world. Haiku in various languages are translated and shared by haiku lovers in many countries, like Kanami's haiku which was originally written in Japanese.

Haiku as a Global Poetry Form

I searched for "haiku" using Google on Dec. 16, 2013, and instantly I



Photo: author

A gathering of haiku poets in Munich, October 2012

found 6,420,000 references in 0.16 seconds. I tried "俳句" (haiku in Japanese) next, and found 4,050,000. It was a delightful surprise for me to learn of the runaway popularity of haiku in English. As a haiku poet, I like to think in a simple way; by comparing the numbers here, it gives me a sufficient reason to envision poets writing haiku horizontally in various climates and time zones. Of course, a substantial portion of the haiku among the 7,050,000 references may point to English translations from another language.

Why Is Haiku Popular?

Why is haiku popular? My haiku master, Dr. Akito Arima, president of the Haiku International Association (HIA), gave a speech on the subject at the fifth Haiku Pacific Rim Conference in the United States in 2012. He pointed out the three characteristics of Japanese haiku:

- 1) Haiku is short (fixed form of 5-7-5 Japanese syllables, with a pause within the poem)
- 2) Haiku is about the seasons (reflected in nature and in our daily lives)
- 3) Haiku is easy to memorize

He also mentioned that haiku acts as a sketch of nature, and does not require poets to be learned or gifted writers. Therefore, writing haiku is open to everybody. An ordinary person can write about his or her natural surroundings using simple words and also memorize other people's haiku with empathy.

Connecting People

Haiku is an interesting form of poetry because the world of haiku does not have a hierarchy where one poet has a thousand readers. Instead, it functions more closely to having one thousand readers for one thousand poets. Haiku connects poets. My first encounter with English-language haiku dates back to April 1997, when the HIA held a convention for haiku delegates from North America in Tokyo. It was an eye-opening event for me to meet people who spoke about Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902) and Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) as their own haiku masters, and wrote haiku in English. They taught me that haiku celebrated something universal and fundamental to human life.

Since then, English-language haiku has opened a new door in my life; by exchanging haiku, I have met many wonderful poets in Montreal, Seattle, New York, etc. In Kolkata, when I was at the historical hall in Tagore House introducing the works of Taneda Santoka (1882-1940), a free-verse haiku poet, I truly thanked the God of Haiku for bringing me there. And at the same time it has given me an opportunity to learn about my own culture, and I began wearing kimono at one haiku conference in Decatur, in the US, in 2000.

In the past decade, with the spread of personal computers worldwide, the English language has been serving as a common language for haiku more and more, connecting poets of different cultures and climates.

The following haiku was the title poem for *Fish in Love: The Haiku*

I cover the goldfish bowl
with a hotel shower cap
fish in love

Emiko Miyashita

Haiku can be serious and funny, too, as our lives contain both aspects.
The next haiku has a different tone from the previous one:

heated pebbles
the procession footsteps
approach in unison

Emiko Miyashita

I wrote this haiku at the Tsukinamisai festival of Ise Jingu on June 16, 2013. The procession of Shinto priests dressed in ceremonial white and wearing wooden shoes, led by Sayako Kuroda (formerly Princess Sayako) moved along the pebbled path in Geku under a scorching sun. As we were waiting at the gate for the main shrine, I heard the procession approaching. No one spoke, everywhere was silence and the footsteps were in unison. The essence of the moment, the sound of footsteps, crystallized into this haiku. The heated pebbles, hopefully, convey the serene tension that was filling the air.

Like a newspaper headline that helps people picture an entire incident, haiku clicks something in our minds. Here the heated pebbles bring a sensation of summer: the light, the breeze, the distant mountains covered in thick greenery, with dark shadows cast by the sun on the pebbles. Even if they are not mentioned in the three lines, we feel what is present there at the moment of the haiku. I am curious what readers might feel about this haiku of mine.

Haiku as a Way of Life

Haiku does not come from one's brain but from our practical and solid daily life. To discover small beauties in the flow of the seasons is a joy. Looking for such a haiku moment along busy streets and even at workplaces surely enriches our emotional lives.

Japanese haiku poets usually use a *sajiki* (season word almanac) to help them write haiku. This is a haiku poet's guidebook for deliberately experiencing the seasons, showing what to look for, and it also lists haiku for each season word, called *kigo*. William J. Higginson's book *Haiku World: An International Poetry Almanac* (Kodansha International, 1996) is one of the first *sajiki* books in English.

James W. Hackett, the winner of the first Japan Airlines Haiku Contest, held in 1964, wrote the following in his book *The Way of Haiku* (1969):

"I have written in the conviction that the best haiku are created from direct and immediate experience with nature, and that this intuitive experience can be expressed in any language. In essence I regard haiku as fundamentally existential and experiential, rather than literary. There are, of course, important structural and artistic considerations involved in the expression of the haiku experience ..."

This was his winning haiku:

A bitter morning:
sparrows sitting together
without any necks

J. W. Hackett

Haiku as a Tool

Haiku can be used as a practical tool for understanding the essence of an



An imperial messenger and procession at Tsukinamisai, Geku, Ise Jingu

experience, for efficient expression, for learning the importance of *ma* (a pause), and also for finding beauty. Most of all, haiku is useful for recognizing that we all exist within the passing of the seasons. Positively acknowledging the comings and goings of plants and bugs can keep us in sync with the seasons. One of my haiku friends in Finland wrote to me: "I feel that haiku often appear in a sudden creative moment or when experiencing very peaceful and harmonious feelings. For a talkative person like me, haiku means really trying to get to basic things, to concentrate and often also feel/see nature. You are so lucky to be surrounded by haiku all the time in Japan!"

I think that apart from highlighting a season, haiku teaches us the importance of being able to pause at the right moment, so that it helps infuse the reader's mind with clear and vivid images. A pause in haiku is said to create a space between the two images to resonate.

I have been writing haiku for the past 20 years. This has enabled me to stay joyful by looking for small beauties in my daily life. Life is not simple but a haiku is. That is why I like haiku. By writing haiku, I can break my complicated life into fragments, picking up the joyful side and letting the sad side cast a faint shadow, perhaps giving depth to the poem.

To conclude, I would like to invite submissions for the 13th World Children's Haiku Contest organized by the JAL Foundation. Children who are 15 years old or under can enter their haiku with their pictures on the theme of "Dreams". Details can be found at the JAL Foundation homepage at: <http://www.jal-foundation.or.jp/>

Currently, I am serving as a director of the foundation and am very happy to promote haiku among young people around the world. By composing haiku at home and at school, children can develop a sensitivity to their own environments and cultures, and learn about the power of words. Later, by reading the anthology of selected haiku from the contest, they can learn to understand other children's lives in various countries, letting their imagination take wings.

A leaf
Flying from the tree
Sees the whole world

Maja Rutar, 13, Slovenia
(Haiku by World Children, 2003)

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