

Haiku Is Mainstream

by

William J. Higginson and Penny Harter

Introduction

For the past fifty years, members of the North American haiku community have wondered if haiku would ever become mainstream — but haiku have been mainstream throughout that half-century. Just in the past few years a Pulitzer Prize-winning book by a major Irish-American poet included almost twenty haiku, and the immediate past poet laureate of the United States collaborated in a widely read and widely praised book of haiku and haiku-like poems. 1

As we see it, there are three aspects of haiku in the mainstream that concern us:

1. Mainstream poets do write haiku.
2. Mainstream poets do what they will with haiku.
3. So why can't our haiku get into mainstream publications?

Mainstream Poets Do Write Haiku

How much more “mainstream” can we get than the big three of the Beat and San Francisco poets, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac? These were only the most visible writers to take up haiku, and many other related poets wrote and continue to write haiku: Lew Welch and Diane Di Prima, for two outstanding examples. While some of these may have played fast and loose with received notions of haiku form and content (preferring free verse and often including Zennish or political elements), many of their poems from the 1950s read very much like the best of our own haiku community products today. Not only that, but other and more recent poets have continued to write eminently “haiku-like” haiku, from the perspective of anyone relatively knowledgeable about Japanese haiku or the haiku of our North American haiku community. Outstanding members of this group include Paul Muldoon, who received the 2003 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for his collection *Moy Sand and Gravel*, with its 19 haiku-like poems, and recent poet laureate of the U.S., Ted Kooser, whose collaboration with Jim Harrison in a book of extremely brief poems — often called “haiku-like” by critics — in *Braided Creek* appeared on the eve of his assuming the national post. Note that while Kooser in effect writes haiku, a previous poet laureate, Robert Hass retranslated and

edited a substantial collection of Japanese haiku and related writings, *The Essential Haiku*, and oversaw and wrote the introduction for a reissue of Cid Corman's 1968 translation of Bashô's *Back Roads to Far Towns*. In the meantime, recent poet laureate Billy Collins has taken up writing haiku, and will have a book of them published by Modern Haiku Press in the near future [[*She Was Just Seventeen*](#)], as Paul Muldoon [[*Sixty Instant Messages to Tom Moore*](#)] did not long ago.

We submit that the range of "haiku" found in books from Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* of 1958 to Harrison and Kooser's *Braided Creek* of 2004 clearly and profoundly demonstrates that haiku — even haiku that we can happily accept as akin to the best of our own in the haiku community — is an important part of the mainstream of North American literature. For some other fairly recent examples, in Gary Gach's 1998 anthology *What Book!?*, we find very satisfying haiku such as "black & white cat" by Diane Di Prima (136), "Orange, the brilliant slug" by Lew Welch (157), "a windy clear day" by Keith Abbott (187) — all fairly "mainstream poets" — and a page full by our own haiku community's Jerry Kilbride (189). Another well known classic anthology of poetry by American Buddhist poets, *Beneath a Single Moon*, edited by Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich, includes Patricia Donegan's famous "Last night lightning" and others (62), as well as substantial groups of haiku by Bob Boldman (32–35), Alexis Rotella (226–27), and Steve Sanfield (228–30). While all four of these poets may be well-known to us here as haiku poets, others with work in *Beneath a Single Moon* include Olga Broumas, John Cage, Diane Di Prima, Margaret Gibson, Allen Ginsberg, Sam Hamill, Jim Harrison, William Heyen, Jane Hirshfield, Robert Kelly, Gary Snyder, and Anne Waldman, to name only the more prominent.

In terms of haiku in mainstream poetry collections by individual poets, we have *The Essential Etheridge Knight*, with "Eastern guard tower" (17), "Under moon shadows" (18), "Clay County" (76), and many others that fit a traditional haiku mode. In more recent writings, there are exemplary haiku in Gary Snyder's *Danger on Peaks*, such as "Cool Clay" (28), "Catching grasshoppers for bait" (35), "Warm nights" (37), and many more. Some haiku in a fairly traditional mode are scattered through Sonia Sanchez's *Like the Singing Coming off the Drums*, including "hunger comes on morning" (19), "what is done is done" (27), "my womb is a dance" (41), and several more. Paul Muldoon's *Moy Sand and Gravel* features verses that should be welcome among classic haiku, such as "The cornet he plays" (58), "Brillo pads? Steel wool?" (59), and "How all seem to vie" (60), though many of his other poems in similar style seem less like what most of us think of as haiku. And in *Braided Creek*, by Jim Harrison and Ted Kooser, among many brief free-verse poems are pure classic haiku such as "Old centipede" (15), "Another spring" (31), "Rain clouds gone" (37), and "In my garden" (49). Harrison and Kooser, as in John Brandi and Steve Sanfield's earlier joint haiku collections, do not reveal which of them wrote which poems, so we can only guess.

Rounding out our brief survey of haiku “in the mainstream” we have a long haiku sequence by William Heyen featured in the first issue of *Chautauqua Literary Journal*, a rather upscale literary review that only recently started publishing from The Writers’ Center at Chautauqua, with its home at the famous cultural center in upstate New York. Among them, we particularly like “open-mouthed dreaming” (93) and “crematorium” (94).

Mainstream Poets Do What They Will with Haiku

Despite these examples of “true haiku” by mainstream writers of the last half-century, many mainstream poets have written poems that they sometimes call haiku, or poems in 5–7–5 or based on some other formal understanding of Japanese haiku, which most of us in the North American haiku community would reject out of hand, claiming that they lack one or another of the essential characteristics of haiku.

Before we move on to poets and examples of this phenomenon, it may be wise to examine one of the most succinct and cogent statements of the characteristics of a Japanese haiku, as assembled by one of the great founders of our haiku community, Harold G. Henderson. In *Haiku in English*, his slender pamphlet first published by the Japan Society of New York in 1965, Henderson said this (originally, he was speaking on behalf of the Japan Society, which accounts for the “we”):

For those who cannot go back to the originals we offer the following analysis of the external characteristics of classical Japanese haiku.

As a general rule a classical Japanese haiku:

1. consists of 17 Japanese syllables (5–7–5)
2. contains at least some reference to nature (other than human nature)
3. refers to a particular event (i.e., it is not a generalization)
4. presents that event as happening now—not in the past.

None of these “general rules” is followed a full 100% of the time although very nearly so. The one most frequently broken is rule 1. The small number of exceptions to the other rules [is] usually more apparent than real. (3–4, emphasis his)

While today Japanese purists and scholars will be quick to point out that Henderson has fudged his “rule 2” by mentioning “nature” rather than “season words”—which is what traditional Japanese haiku rules actually require—this is the kind of thinking that has guided most of us in the haiku community here for forty years or more. (Henderson does go on to explain season words on a following page but says they “may be connected with a particular season only by convention”—a rather

simplistic and demeaning dismissal in light of the extensive literature on this aspect of haikai and haiku, from long before Bashô's day to the present. "Rule 3" is entirely his invention, though it may have some basis in Japanese critical works about haiku in the 1920s and '30s, which corresponds to the period in which he first became acquainted with haiku. Also, contrary to his "rule 4," some traditional Japanese haiku make distinctive use of various past tenses. Finally, he omits mention of the grammatical break or "cut" [kire] that most haiku include, and to which a chapter is usually devoted in beginner's haiku guides in Japan.)

Our main informers about Japanese haiku have tried to give us their views deeply based on a close examination of their subject, swayed as they may have been by religious or critical ideology. Still, the majority of North Americans who recognized the word "haiku" as a kind of poem in the 1960s and '70s seemed only to know about the seventeen syllables. (Note that Henderson specified "Japanese syllables"—well aware that these are not very much like our notion of "syllables" in English.) Many of these people were elementary school teachers who fell into the easy and pleasant business of teaching both poetry composition and syllable counting to their students at the same time, producing, first of all, reams of 5–7–5 ditties that hardly resemble what those of us here today think of as haiku, teachers though some of us may be. Second of all, when such 5–7–5 verses are composed by naive poets, they frequently include generalizations and padding that vitiate whatever poetic qualities may have inspired the writing in the first place.²

When a major poet takes up some simplistic notion of form and "plays" with it, however, eventually making it her or his own, something quite unusual, even unique, may result. In fact, this is what has happened over and over again in Japan, as we can readily see simply by examining several haiku each by Bashô, Chiyo-ni, Buson, Issa, and other major masters of the past. Very quickly we will find that any notion of haiku we may have constructed on the basis of several of Bashô's relatively nature—and tradition—bound poems will have to be stretched a bit to let in the anachronistic and fantastical stories embedded in the haiku of Buson, or the subtly emotional and often tactile verses of Chiyo-ni, and few of their works will fully prepare readers for the very personal relationship between Issa and the many small insects and other creatures with whom he dialogues.

Japanese haiku, however, either by the rules or by the masters, is not at issue here. Let's see what some modern North American master poets have done with a notion of "haiku" that may or may not agree with our own. For example, John Ashbery's "I lost my ridiculous accent" and "Come to the edge" in his poem "37 Haiku" (128–30) seem of appropriate length, but reveal no apparent interest in any of the other characteristics mentioned above. And Etheridge Knight's "O Manhattan town!" (99) or "Woe South Africa!" (101) speak to their targets of drug addiction and apartheid. Sonia Sanchez, in her book cited earlier, includes such "haiku"

as “i am a watersnake” (33), “am i yo philly” (40), and many others more frankly sexual than is likely to seem much like Japanese haiku to us. And Paul Muldoon, in the same series mentioned earlier, includes a striking reference to the assassination of John F. Kennedy in “From his grassy knoll” (54) and more unsavory stuff in “Behind the wood bin” (57), among others.

So Why Can't Our Haiku Get Into Mainstream Publications?

We think there are three answers to this question. First, if we mean haiku by poets who are part of our haiku community, many of them do, indeed, “get into mainstream publications.” For example, it's hard to imagine how much more mainstream you can get than having work in books published and widely distributed by Doubleday, Simon & Schuster, and W.W. Norton. These are the publishers who put out successive editions of Cor van den Heuvel's *The Haiku Anthology*, in 1974, 1986, and 1999, respectively, the last still in print. The first two of these are among the largest publishers in the English-speaking world, and the third is arguably the most prestigious poetry publisher in the United States. Our own *Haiku Handbook* was first published by McGraw-Hill, another American publishing giant. Aside from these frankly haiku-oriented publications, there are also the two anthologies of American Buddhist writings mentioned earlier, published by Parallax Press, a well-known Buddhist house, and Shambhala Books, well established as a leading publisher of works related to Asian thought and literature. Whether we agree with the emphasis on Zen or Buddhism in some haiku circles or not, such publishers and their popular anthologies do not sit outside the mainstream of our literature.

Second, we respond to the question, “Where are the mainstream collections by individual haiku poets?” By and large, they are the same place as all collections by individual poets: in the small literary and university presses. The fact is that only name-brand poets, usually, will be published by the giants mentioned above, and those only late in their careers, after decades of publishing books with press runs of 500 or 1,000 with smaller publishers who do not have the resources or prestige to put their books into the mainstream. Moreover, with the development of several excellent small presses devoted to haiku in English, we suggest that today it is probably easier to get a book of haiku published than it is to get a book of any other kind of poems published.

Even among those publishers who specialize in quality poetry — which of course include no “major” publishers — the poets they publish compete fiercely for the honor of having a book of poems from a Copper Canyon or a White Pine or the many other excellent literary publishers we could name. In fact, of the hundreds of books of poems published each year by literary presses, only a few dozen will make over 500 sales within the first two years, after which — because of strange Internal Revenue Service rules — they become a serious liability if the publisher decides to keep

them in stock.

Further, the books of poetry you see in a typical large bookstore are only a small fraction of the books of poetry in print at any given time. In a small bookstore, if you're an avid reader of poetry, you're not likely to see any book by an author whose name you don't already know. It's like looking at the poetry in *The New Yorker* or *Atlantic*—unless most people interested in poetry already know a poet's name, that poet is unlikely to find his or her poems published there.

Third, we must also realize that haiku is mainly an amateur activity. There are two quite different aspects of this. The vast majority of English-language haiku poets, including the majority of those published at least once a year in one or another of our haiku magazines, are amateur writers. (This may be true of the majority of poets published in poetry magazines, as well.) Many of them have never learned how to type a manuscript properly for presentation to an editor. Do you, for example, know the arcane rules about when to use a dash instead of a hyphen, and how to type something in your manuscript that will signal the typesetter to use a dash instead of a hyphen? For many years, the majority of haiku magazine editors (who were usually their own typesetters) did not know such rules themselves, so one could say that most haiku in English were both written and published by amateurs.

While we may consider some of the so-called "haiku" of the mainstream, professional poets inferior, as haiku, to many haiku in our magazines, the chances are that one of the differences between those professional poets' haiku and ours is that they read better as grammatical, well-formed English verse. Part of this problem may result from a combination of the translation-ese that pervaded many of our most important foundation books about haiku during the mid-twentieth century, and from the continuing efforts of naive haiku-writers to write 5-7-5s, which almost invariably end up padded.

For an example of the first problem, translators faced with poems that apparently show an action but have no grammatical subject often used to try to sidestep the pronoun in English, producing such nonsense as the following, said to be by Bashô's disciple Bonchô:

Throwing away the ashes,
The white plum-blossoms
Became cloudy.

(tr. Blyth, 983)

The Japanese reader, without the help of a pronoun, knows perfectly well that the original means, rather, something like this:

I toss the ashes
and dim the white plum-blossoms
of this hedge.

Did Blyth really imagine that “the white plum-blossoms” “threw away the ashes”? Of course not, but that’s what he allowed this translation to say. The kind of grammatical blindness illustrated by Blyth’s gaffe still shows up in many of our haiku magazines.³

To cite just one other horrific example that used to pervade our haiku world: almost every English-language haiku magazine of the 1970s contained at least one or two poems a year referring to “lightning”— the electrical discharge from cloud to cloud or cloud to ground that accompanies a thunderstorm — as “lightening”— the quality of becoming lighter over time. Fortunately, this common misspelling has almost disappeared from our haiku lately, though I still spot it occasionally. Nonetheless, it points up the fact that, as haiku poets, we need to police our own grammar and spelling — for simple comprehensibility, as well as to meet any critical demands.

On another front, we’ll not waste time here with examples of the strained results of shoe-horning a “thought” into 5–7–5 that show up on every haiku editor’s desk and on many school bulletin boards even today. On the other hand, let’s acknowledge that, despite the best efforts of those of us who know and love haiku, the explosion of “haiku” on the World Wide Web in the 1990s was largely devoted to 5–7–5s about current events, or Spam, or computer error messages, or some other faddish thing that caught the imaginations of the millions of Web surfers. Truth be told, many of the participants in that 5–7–5 bash of the previous decade had little access to good information about haiku, and though we may chafe at the results, we can hardly blame people for joining in a popular pastime based on someone else’s erroneous notion of exotic poetry.

Largely because of these horrid and burgeoning examples, some editors of literary magazines specifically say they will not accept haiku. Poor them! For they, like the 5–7–5 headline haikuists featured on the London Observer Web site, have no more idea what haiku is than the innocent American and Canadian school teachers of the 1950s who taught their students to count syllables to write poems. Or, those editors may have found that the terrible haiku far outweigh whatever good haiku come in their mailbags, quite literally. It hardly seems worth our time to blame such editors for not studying haiku and encouraging good haiku submissions, when they have no apparent interest in doing so.

Even so, there are mainstream magazines — good magazines — that have accepted haiku. Often, the haiku they have published were presented in artfully constructed sequences, which may have looked like regular poems with three-line stanzas to the editors. Who cares? The point is, haiku can be presented to editors in an acceptable way, and if they are well-crafted

English, they may well get published. But don't expect to be published among well-known, major poets, unless you are also a well-known, major poet.

Before leaving this topic, we also want to point out that one North American haiku magazine has begun a kind of reverse-attack on the problem. Since taking over editorship of *Modern Haiku* magazine in 2002, Lee Gurga deliberately invited major poets who may have written some haiku to contribute. He included haiku by Gary Snyder, Sharon Olds, Michael McClure, Paul Muldoon, and Billy Collins, to name just a few. By including the haiku of highly visible, mainstream poets in one of our haiku magazines, Gurga has put new haiku thoughts in the heads of some people who may have thought they had little to learn about haiku, while at the same time putting some of our poems into the hands of those same poets. In short *Modern Haiku* magazine has been mainstream for the past four years, and if you are fortunate enough to publish haiku in it regularly, you may consider your haiku "published in the mainstream."

Conclusion

Haiku is already mainstream. If we want our own haiku to be mainstream, we need to work at it. Years ago, when I asked Yatsuka Ishihara, a major Japanese haiku master, what he would like to say to foreign haiku poets, he said "Polish your language!" We can't think of better advice for any poets who wish to become "mainstream"—with haiku or any other kinds of poems.

Notes

1 A version of this essay was originally presented as a lecture at the Haiku North America conference in Port Townsend, Wash., September 23, 2005.

2 For more on the formal aspect of Japanese haiku and possible parallels in English, see Bill's article "Haiku by the Numbers, Seriously" online at <<http://haikai.home.att.net/haiku-by-the-numbers.html>>.

3 For more on grammatical problems in our haiku involving "ing" see Bill's article "The ING Thing" online at <<http://haikai.home.att.net/the-ing-thing.html>>.

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