

# The Haiku Habit

by Jeanne Emrich

Imagine you are lying on the grass on a summer evening. A firefly comes winging over your head and, for just a second, you see it set against the constellation, Cassiopeia. In that one brief moment, the firefly has aligned you, the Earth, and the universe, and you are reminded that all things are interrelated. How would you describe such an experience in a poem?

The haiku way is just to say it – simply. Written in a very direct manner, haiku tell the who, what, where, and when of the moment as the author perceived it through his or her senses. The end result of such a concrete description is that the reader feels as if he or she also is having the experience. And because commentary is kept to a minimum, the reader is free to come to his or her own conclusions about what the experience means.

**star gazing . . .  
a firefly joins  
Cassiopeia**

Because haiku often are written fresh from experience – or soon thereafter – and jotted down on the odd piece of paper or, better yet, in a pocket notebook kept on hand just for this purpose, they are easy to get into the habit of writing.

As a result of writing haiku, you will:

- Be more alive to the present moment
- Recapture the freshness and vividness of perceptions you had as a youth
- Deepen your appreciation of nature and your place within it
- Realise the potential of each moment for profound realisation.

## How to get into the Haiku Habit

Before starting, it might be a good idea to do a little warm-up. During the next week, try these exercises:

- Practice focusing totally on the moment at hand – the who, what, where, and when of it
- Devote a day to each of your five senses; write down a day's worth of sensations from all that you touch, for example
- Try walking slowly through a park, the forest or along city streets; absorb the details, the little happenings, as well as the ambience.

To start writing haiku, you need only be on the lookout for a “haiku moment” in your daily life. For example, you are going to work during the morning rush hour. Behind you is a glorious full moon. What two or three images or sensory impressions in this moment combine to make it meaningful to you? In this example, the images are the rush-hour traffic and the full moon as you see it in your rear-vision mirror. Jot these images down (ie, at the first stoplight).

When you are ready, sit down with a fresh sheet of paper or notebook and work up several versions

describing these images in three lines. In the end, your poem might be as simple and straightforward as:

**rush hour traffic . . .  
in the rear-vision mirror  
the full moon setting**

Remember that haiku are grounded in your senses. Try to describe what you saw, touched, tasted, smelled, or heard.

**lights out . . .  
still the fragrance  
of daffodils**

Try not to use Western-style literary metaphors or similes, such as “my love is like a red, red rose”. Use simple language and let the moment speak for itself. This allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusions about what the poem means.

**an armful of roses –  
the look  
in your eyes**

For the same reasons, use adjectives and adverbs sparingly.

To help your reader linger within your poem and savour its meaning, put in a grammatical break at the end of the first line or the second, but not at both. This slows down the speed of the poem and gives it a greater feeling of substance.

**clouds drifting  
past a liquid moon . . . (break)  
frog chorus**

To emphasise the break, you may wish to use an ellipsis, hyphen, comma, colon, or semi-colon. A single line followed by a break should consist of just a word or two or a short phrase.

**traffic intersection –**

The two lines that follow may be a short sentence or another longer phrase.

**a butterfly crosses  
against the light**

This also is true when the structure is two lines – break – one line.

In haiku, brevity is a virtue. Use about 17 syllables or less, striving always for natural expression.

**such morning glories!  
the postman's hand reaches in  
to find the mailbox**

Many people write in lines of 5-7-5 syllables, according to the Japanese tradition of 5-7-5 sound-symbols. However, English syllables are longer than the average Japanese sound-symbol and make for a more wordy poem. You may wish to try writing haiku with 10-14 syllables using approximately a short-long-short line arrangement.

**spring walk –  
there it is again  
my shadow**

However, do not cut out so many syllables that your poem sounds as clipped as a telegram!

Haiku traditionally follow the seasons and include a “kigo” or season word. In Japan, there are “saijiki” or season word reference books with thousands of entries to help poets in each season as well as in the “New Year”. While today many poems do not contain a “kigo”, knowing and using them will help you to become aware that topics for your haiku are almost inexhaustible. For instance:

**Spring:** Apple and cherry blossoms, tulips, lovers, sunrises, kites, melting snow, ploughing, muddy roads, lambs, chicks, tadpoles, spring rain.

**Summer:** Cricket, mosquitoes, camping, twilight, gardening, ladybirds, grasshoppers, rainstorms, hot days, rainbows, swimming, hiking.

**Autumn:** Falling leaves, aspects of the moon, chrysanthemums, pumpkins, sunsets, starry nights, scarecrows, autumn winds, Indian summer, cutting wood.

**Winter:** Snowflakes, longest night, frost, geese, baking, bare trees.

Haiku work with the ordinary facts of daily life. One of the greatest surprises of this form of poetry is that in the ordinary, the everyday, you can find the sublime.

**my bathwater –  
here too shines  
the moon**

In so short a form as haiku, you must get right to the point. One way is to focus on the particular – the one among the many, the close-up in the general scene, the last, the first, the opposite. The significant detail – the particular – puts your concrete images in sharp focus and provides the evidence that convinces the reader of what you are trying to say.

**a pause to admire  
the mosquito's long legs –  
then I slap!**

To add depth to your poems, look for and try to express fundamental truths about life rather than merely recording a fact.

**behind the barn  
prairie grasses reclaiming  
the basketball court**

This is a poem about the persistent life force of nature, its resilience and capacity for self-renewal.

Consider also using natural symbols in your poems. The world abounds with them, and they come to life when we see them in action – when they are doing something or something is being done to them.

**falling  
with the snowflakes –  
magnolia blossoms**

Here a symbol for winter and a symbol for spring (in my part of the world) interact, evoking the fragility of all living things.

Resonance in a haiku comes from juxtaposing two (or sometimes three) images or impressions to create an unspoken meaning that really sings! Your task is to recognise these elements within the “haiku moment” as you experience it. The highest degree of resonance often comes from juxtaposing quite disparate images and showing a connection between them.

**first snow . . .  
lined up against the window  
red peppers**

Here the “first snow” and “red peppers” are the dissimilar images. The middle line shows how they are connected in a meaningful way. Against the chill of the season’s first snowfall, the red peppers have been set up as a line of defence.

While writing several versions of a poem, you will explore different ways of juggling your images to get the best possible juxtaposition. A good rule of thumb is that the image that makes the rest of the poem resonate should be on the third line. In other words, save the best for last!

**morning reflections –  
suddenly a fish leaps  
into the trees**

Occasionally, you may wish to try a “leap” in which certain explanatory words are left out of your poem, resulting in an unusual juxtaposition of images or way of describing those images.

**spring storm –  
in the cornfields  
puddles of sky**

In the third line of this poem, I left out the word “reflected”, as in “puddles of reflected sky”, to accomplish this leap.

Nature often is expressed in haiku filtered through the Japanese aesthetic of “sabi” – a sense of beauty in nature combined with a feeling of loneliness. When you feel a touch of sadness upon seeing a lovely scene in nature, try to figure out what elements evoke that feeling in you and include them in your haiku.

**winter stillness . . .  
the last leaf on the bush  
curling into itself**

Haiku also has a long tradition of humour, whether it be a wry observation of the moment at hand or a playful use of the language – and sometimes both in combination. Do not hesitate to put in your poems what strikes you as amusing.

**pickup basketball –  
every house  
dribbling kids**

Remember to save the best for last, so your third line reads like a punch line in a good joke.

Educators tell us that it takes three to four weeks of daily practice to acquire a new habit. To make writing haiku a personal habit of your own, try this simple discipline: for the next four weeks, commit yourself to writing at least one haiku a day in your calendar.

Remember that every moment is potentially a haiku moment. Masaoka Shiki, one of the four great masters of haiku, said that a single place can provide enough haiku for 20 poems!

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