

Japanese Poems for American School Kids? or Why and How to Not Teach Haiku

by William J. Higginson

When the topic of haiku comes up in a conversation with teachers, two responses flash in my mind: Why use Japanese poems in our schools? and, How can haiku be presented to children so as to avoid the pious and sentimental generalities so often poured into the 5-7-5 syllable-form? The study of Japanese poetry was the beginning of my own serious training as a writer; I definitely feel it has something to offer Western readers and writers of most any age. And I have wrestled with the problem of presenting haiku to school kids during two years of active work in New Jersey's schools under the aegis of New Jersey State Council on the Arts and the Arts Council of the Morris Area.

1

Why use Japanese poems? Because many Japanese poets manage to remain in the "child mind" that sees things as they are, in terms of themselves:

the nail box:
every nail
is bent

Hosai (1) *
(1885-1926)

There are no metaphors, personifications, or other "literary devices" in this poem. A metaphor or similar technique, no matter how apt, would momentarily distract us from the object itself by referring to something *outside* of the here/now experience. Hosai gives us no confusion of focus, only direct seeing of real things. (The Japanese original is no less succinct than this translation.) The Epic Aroma of Thunderous Meters?—replaced, by a subtle onomatopoeia that makes words more like things than like thoughts.

The "words-as-things" approach works even when the rhythms take on human concern and metaphor

shows the-human-eye-seeing almost as much as the-thing-seen, like this:

dadadan dadadan dadadan dadadan dan dan
dan dan dan dan dah dah dah

night wind licking the Kurashio crawls over the field &
three bonfires blaze.

cra-ra-rackling.
swinging flames.

dan dan dan dan
boys leopardskins round their waists.
drumsticks carving the wind &
dan dan dadadan . . .

from 'hachijo rhapsody'
Kusano Shimpei (2) *
(1903-)

I sense a directness here unlike much of anything in English after Chaucer until William Carlos Williams rammed us back into life, present, intense. Things not described so much as presented.

3 The most romantic of early 20th century Japanese poets writes directly from the experience of his senses:

came to
a mirror shop
what a jolt—
I could've been
some bum walking by

Ishikawa Takuboku (3)
(1885-1912)

* Many Japanese poets are known by their pen names (e.g., Hōsai). When family names are given, the Japanese usually present them first, but Western publishers are inconsistent. I give all Japanese names in the publishers' order, with family names in italics.

* Books are described at the end of the article.

as did the earliest Japanese poets we know:

The sound
Of the gourds
Struck for the pleasure
Of the courtiers
Reverberates through the shrine.

anon. (4)
(pre-800 A.D.)

- 4 Japanese poets have always been keen observers of all nature, including human:

"What's this for?"
Says the carpenter
As he cuts it off.

anon. (5)
(18th or 19th century)

as are today's Japanese school children:

DADDY

Daddy is going to his office.
I waved my hand "Goodbye."
Daddy waved his hand too.
My younger sister said,
"Goodbye."
He waved his hand again.
Mommy said, "Goodbye."
He didn't wave his hand.
Why?

Kamiko Yoshiko (6)
(age 7)

- 5 Japanese folk poetry, like that of other peoples, arises from daily life. Perhaps there are not as many ballads as in the West; the affairs of men and women may not achieve epic proportions in Japanese minds as often as they do in the West. But the feelings of the moment, of the only time we ever truly live, now, come directly in poems like this:

Fog clings
To the high mountain;
My eye clings
To him.

anon. (7)
(early 20th century)

- 6 Having studied Japanese poetry seriously, I don't want to muddy the considerable distinctions among the various genres. But I think there is an important unity in Japanese poetry, and we'd do well to

capitalize on it, rather than dote on the superficial formal characteristics of one poorly understood genre such as haiku. So why use Japanese poems in the classroom? Because they come directly from the experience of the poets, and usually steer clear of the metaphorical cover-up so characteristic of Western poetry. *

- 7 Because of this directness and intensity, Japanese poems, at their best (in adequate translations, such as those cited here), can easily be experienced by each reader or hearer for himself. Any response a child (or adult) makes to them cannot be called "wrong," and there is nothing in these poems requiring esoteric explanations. Teachers are freed to help each child find his own understanding of the poem, just as each must find his own understanding of the world, which also requires no esoteric knowledge.

- 8 Finally, the Japanese sensibility gives humans a place in nature, not over it. Many Japanese poets write of men, women, and children in much the same way as they write of pine trees, rocks, and factories—seeing directly both the outer and inner life of each. Presenting work that reflects this "child mind" sensibility to our children gives their own sharp observations a family to join in the world, and hopefully will lead them to others.

II

- 9 The haiku and its companion genre senryu[†] demonstrate these unique characteristics of Japanese poetry at their most intense concentration. In them metaphorical thinking, seeing something as having the qualities of something else and using that perception as a *descriptive* technique, seldom appears. Often things and events do illuminate one another, but never one at the expense of the other. To put it in terms perhaps more accessible to Western readers, haiku and senryu depend for their effect primarily

* The main exception to this statement is the so-called Court Poetry. Typical of our involvement with the Far East, the most indirect kind of Japanese poetry has got most attention from Western scholars—e.g., Brower and Miner's *Japanese Court Poetry*, wherein a decent discussion of the originals suffers from some of the most linguistically insensitive translating I've seen. Most of Waley's work in Japanese literature is also from this area.

† For clear, accurate definitions of these and related terms see the appendix to *The Haiku Anthology* (10). For present purposes the distinction between haiku and senryu may be oversimplified to the statement that haiku deal with "natural" objects and events, while senryu deal with human foibles. See also reference (5).

upon the single significant image clearly and directly presented, or often upon a striking juxtaposition of two such images. Haiku are almost never philosophical or didactic in intent. They rarely exhibit an author's awareness of a reader who must be proselytized. The best haiku seem to come from a mind clear as a calm mountain spring.

10 Relatively few translators have successfully captured these characteristics. Most seem to have spent a lot of effort on limiting the reader's understanding of the original to their own limited response, often supplying grammatical connections that subordinate one image to another despite their equal importance in the original, even sometimes constructing similes or metaphors for their translations where none were intended or implied in Japanese.

11 I have been reluctant to use haiku in schools. The lack of readily available quality translations has given me pause. Also, I have felt the word *haiku* to be so contaminated by the number of sentimental 5-7-5s produced in schools that I did not want to be associated with the term in that environment, though I have edited *Haiku Magazine* for a number of years. And finally, I did not wish to be drawn into discussions of "the haiku form," which I consider to be the terminology mainly responsible for many Westerners' poor understanding of haiku. These problems have kept me from presenting haiku to American school children for most of a year, unless cornered by some teacher's or administrator's expectations. When so cornered I have usually fallen into the pedant's last resort, declaiming what a haiku is not.

12 However, the fortuitous appearance of *The Haiku Anthology* (10) has helped me to find a way of circumventing the bull without being gored on the horns of misunderstood terminology. The following is my diary for the first happy ^{haiku} day in my Poets-in-the-Schools career, with added examples from subsequent days.

DIARY OF A HAIKU DAY

Today will be different. I will eschew the word *haiku*, and simply present the haiku itself. By presenting the poems themselves, and helping children to see how they are constructed, I will give them the *experience* of haiku without causing the confusion that using the soiled terminology would bring about. (It is important that I will be using American English originals, not poems in translationese, which is what most of the easily available haiku translations are in.)

First class: Immediately after walking in, I wait for their full attention then explain that I am about to read a number of very short poems. The poems will be so short that if they miss one word, they will miss the whole poem. I also say that they can respond to the poems in any way they want, that there is no correct or incorrect response, and that I will pause at

the end of each poem for them to laugh, cry, or giggle—whatever they want to do. Then I read about thirty-five poems from *The Haiku Anthology*, deliberately choosing those with extremely clear sense-appealing images, some quite traditional, like:

Snow falling
on the empty parking lot:
Christmas Eve . . .

Eric W. Amann

Time after time
caterpillar climbs this broken stem,
then probes beyond.

J. W. Hackett

I deliberately mix in a number that seem quite mysterious, whether through choice of image, juxtaposition, or use of language, and carefully include several with modern, city imagery, such as:

an empty elevator
opens
closes

Jack Cain

Moonlit sleet
In the holes of my
Harmonica

David Lloyd

the old barber
sweeping hair
into the giant bag

James Tipton

an empty wheelchair
rolls
in from the waves

Cor van den Heuvel

I also try to pick a number that rely on senses other than sight, or on more than one sense:

crickets . . .
then
thunder

Larry Wiggin

walking the snow-crust
not sinking
sinking

Anita Virgil

Under ledges
and looking for the coolness
that keeps touching my face.
Foster Jewell

In all of this, I read very slowly, concentrating on careful enunciation and giving full weight to both punctuation- and line-break-indicated pauses. Leaving space between poems for responses. The reading goes over well, the children laughing, squirming, or wide-eyed at almost every poem. (The thirty-five poems take only seven to ten minutes.)

After reading the poems, I tell the kids that these poems are all made up of "images." Without further explanation, *I ask them to tell me what images are.* Very quickly, as I write their responses on the blackboard, we have the five senses listed, and such words as "in your mind," "thinking about pictures," and "in your imagination" come out. I pounce on this last, immediately writing IMAGINATION across two panels of blackboard in foot-high capitals. Then I say, circling and underlining as I go,

"Imagination is 'I'

IMAGINATION

"in the 'country'

IMAGINATION

"of 'images'!"

IMAGINATION

The aptness of this mnemonic shocks even me! I go on to ask where images can come from, and after a little prodding, I get them to agree with me that there are basically three sources:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| 1. the senses | images within the range of <i>here and now</i> vision, hearing, touch, etc. |
| 2. the memory | images <i>stored in the mind</i> , whether from personal experience or from books, movies, etc. |
| 3. the fantasy | images <i>invented in the mind</i> , usually by combining material from the senses and/or the memory. |

I also point out that the words *fantasy* and *imagination* are usually confused, but that while *fantasy* refers only to those new images invented in the mind,

imagination refers to all images.

All this, and only fifteen minutes have elapsed since the start of the lesson! And more important, each child seems to have been actively following the whole thing, delighting in the poems, more than half of them contributing to the lively discussion, and giving ample evidence of new thought in its quickest and most joyful mode. Important for me to remember that all this discussion, covering topics that could well be the subject of an advanced seminar in some graduate school writing program, arose spontaneously *from the children* and from me in a live atmosphere of curiosity, high energy, and delight. I must keep in mind for the future that the particular details of the discussion, of the terminology, must arise from the children, and that any guiding hand I supply must come from honest interaction with their minds as *equals*, or I will sap the energy from this interchange.

To the writing. To make sure that everyone has a real working knowledge of what an image is, I suggest that we make up a poem that contains two images which connect in some strange way. Asking anyone to call out an image, I get "The Washington Monument," which I put on the board as I wonder where we could possibly go with that. Resorting to the usual last-ditch (it should be the first) technique—i.e., trusting the children to bail me out—I ask for another image to pair with that, one which will 'draw sparks' from it. Given as good as asked, and with a war whoop I present their handiwork to them:

*The Washington Monument
The Lincoln Tunnel*

Asking the kids what makes this a good poem produces immediate answers like, "They're both presidents' names." "One goes up, the other you look at the inside."

Overjoyed at their understanding, but still wondering if we can cool it a little bit and get a more or less straight haiku-like poem from the class, I ask them for images that are not major landmarks, and momentarily two of the quieter kids respond with:

*a desert island
a single flower*

At this point I know it's time to shut up and let them write. Most write single images, or image lists, like:

The big eyed owl hooting in the dark.

Scott Karan

Big skinny frogmen looking for treasure divers.

Michael Berliner

*Ugly scary dangerous monsters
Salty brown crisp pretzels
Big fat hairy canary*

*Hot blazing orange Sun
Nice cool flowery Spring
Snuggly white new Pajamas*

Ann Marie Morreale

*(from Mrs. Friedman's and Ms.
Lacioppa's fourth grades, Walton
School, Springfield, N.J.)*

With a sense of building success I go on to the next class. Decide to abandon "the haiku" as an objective, simply using the haiku intro as a means of getting into images. This class gets off on whacky, built-up images and lists of same:

Scrumptilious Boo-urple Ice Cream Cone

*Stupid scrumptilious boo-urple chocolate ice cream
cone*

*A dumb good tasting blue, purple, and chocolate
striped ice cream cone*

*An ugly great tasting blue, purple and striped ice
cream cone*

*A drippy scrumpous blue and purple squiggled ice
cream cone*

*A bad, great delicious ice cream cone with boo-urple
chocolate jimmies on the cone!*

Heidi Yormark

*Blue great terrific hot cold big word,
Blue ugly hot cold terrible muddy alphabet,
Blue disgusting hot cold ugly alphabet with letters
missing,
Blue beautiful wet marvelous alphabet soup.*

Jill Jacobs

(from Mrs. Samer's fifth grade)

In the remaining two classes I turn them loose, inviting really weird images, with results like:

*Haired purple and green shrivelled prune
Knotted prune
Shrivelled up old lady
Green & brown shrivelled apple
A bowl of gushy rotten fruit*

Teddi Lizerman

*A poppy seed elephant with foam
rubber tusks and a purple with
pink pokadotted trunk.*

*A south-eastern squirble reminds me
of a green snake-headed eyeball sucker.*

*A grenapo, stinky, crispy, hairy snake
eating cold mini ravioli with skin
from a finger relish on top.*

*Bill Koppel
Jono Brown
Andy Dewey*

(from Mrs. Aronow's fifth grade)

*A man with so much hair you can't see his head
A bag with a head in it*

Donna Bain

*An old jukebox
A funny record*

Ellen B.

*An over weight dinosaur
A flattened out archeologist*

Buddy Pinkava

*Reading a book
Remembering what it was about*

John Mann

*A cactus plant.
A dark pink flower.*

Donna Baltus

*(from Mrs. Larson's and
Ms. Lacioppa's fourth grades)*

As with any lesson plan used frequently, I have deliberately varied my approach somewhat through the day, and of course each class has its own personality to add to the mix. Trying the same basic approach in another school with sixth graders produces work like this:

*The tired old doctor
The dusty girl*

Barry M.

*The sound of a light bulb
when it's off.*

Robert

*The pointed pyramid
The long belt
Fat boy
The Revolution*

Jim Taylor

*(from Mrs. Goldstein's class,
Hehnlly School, Clark, N.J.)*

And I take the same plan to a middle school, where working with seventh and eighth graders produces these:

*The fire flickering in the distance
consuming
everything in sight.*

Mike Giger

*old leather wallet
luxurious apartment*

Donna Perini

*(from mixed classes, Long
Valley Middle School,
Morris County, N.J.)*

Working with the sixth graders in Clark, I decide to turn it into a collaborative writing session. In one class the desks are in traditional rows, so I ask the kids to pair up or make teams of three. In another class they are sitting in groups of four or five, which I ask to work together. This after the usual introduction to haiku as image poems, after giving each child a chance to make one or two short image poems of his own. I ask them to turn their papers over, and put just one image at the top of their papers. Then, "Pass your paper to the person on your right. Now, looking at the image on that paper, try to see it very clearly in your mind. Then put right under it whatever image that brings to mind." After giving them time to get their new image down, I have them pass their papers to their right again, and tell them to do the same thing, concentrating on just the last image on the paper. The trick is to think only of the last image on the list, and put down whatever that image makes you think of (unlike the collaborative story, where each contributor wants to maintain some loose continuity by referring back to the whole story on each round). With the smaller teams I suggest that the

papers be passed around the group two or three times. Each child starts his own list, and they finish their own off when it returns to them on the last round by adding the final image to the list they began. Thus in a few minutes a whole class can produce as many collaborative poems as there are children in the class. Later I do the same thing with the seventh and eighth graders in Long Valley. Some examples:

The Attractive Watch

*The attractive watch
Mighty Mouse
Little
Piece
War
Death
Ear
Drum
Instrument
Music
Song*

Bob, Darryl, & Donald

*White snow falling
while stray dogs whimper
jumping
leaping
hopping
wondering*

Nanci Hilf & others

*A cat sitting on a chair
staring at nothing
being nothing
soundly sleeping
purring silently*

Becky Mitchel & others

The Queer Lines

*the large frog
a small pond
fish
river
Nile
Egypt
Africa
animals
tiger*

cat
small
short
ant

Susan & Ingrid

*(from Mrs. Goldstein's
sixth grade, Clark)*

clock ticking
grandfather clock
tich toct tick
it stopped
someone wound it up
again

Donna & others

*(from Mrs. Greene's
sixth grade, Clark)*

a light in darkness
a needle falling in silence
a sound, small but clear
racing through your ears
only to hear the beating
of a heart

Laina Jusko et al.

Holes in an old brick wall
Red bricks with white cement
An old tenement in a newly built-up city
A city under the sun
The desert with one abandoned building
in the middle
A hole in an expanse of nothing

*Mrs. Steffan, Joanne Rice,
Donna Perini, Pat Lane,
and Carolyn Delmonico*

a lily in an empty lake
a frog on a lily pad
a frog croaking in the night
a swamp in the pitch black night
a patch of quick sand

*Sam Eberhart, Declan Lane,
Tom Dymacek, & James Williams*

*(mixed seventh & eighth grades,
Long Valley Middle School)*

One group sits in a large circle; we do whole-class pass-arounds. After the introduction to images each child writes one at the top of his paper. Papers passed to the right, and another image added, same instructions as before, then to the right again, and so on until each paper makes the full round. One of the resultant lists:

Bubbling lava pouring out of a volcano
People running down the streets
With their hair flying in the wind
On a motorcycle
Clock ticking
The paper hanging
Wall paper drapes
Pizza
Brick
A head as hard as a rock
A store washed away
A rock
Pebble
Stone
Dirt
Grass
Trees
Plants
Green slime
King Cong
Mandolins at dusk
Painting on the sky
Rainbow
Collision
Firecrackers in the sky

*(Mrs. Bauman's eighth grade,
Long Valley Middle School)*

All this may seem pretty far afield from haiku, but in fact the Japanese haiku grew out of the *haikai-no-renga*, or comic linked poem, in which a number of poets would participate in just such an image-association game as these students, often with just such far out results. (An example of traditional Japanese haikai, "The Kite's Feathers", may be found in reference (8), but the images are from medieval Japanese life, and difficult for moderns to fully enjoy.)

Just as there is a slight difference in tone between the mostly traditional Japanese poems quoted in part I of this article and the North American haiku at the beginning of part II, so there is a difference between the productions of adults who see themselves as serious (or comic) poets and children simply taking delight in the images of their own minds. But there is an important unity running through all of this: the unity of vivid, imaginative writing that appeals directly to the senses, and tickles the mind. All this without

raising the question that confronts and confounds almost all readers of traditional Western poetry, "What does it mean?" Like life, it is to be felt, not questioned.

A FEW WORDS ON THE BOOKS (check for current prices before ordering):

(1) *thistle/brilliant/morning*. Shiki, Hekigodō, Santōka, Hōsai; translated by William J. Higginson (England: Byways Press, 1973; avail. in U.S. @ \$1.50 from From Here Press, Box 2702, Paterson, N.J. 07509). A few poems each by four early 20th-century haiku poets; the translations are accurate; includes many in "experimental forms." Could be used by writers of any age.

(2) *frogs & others*. Kusano Shimpei; translated by Cid Corman and Kamaike Susumu (N.Y.: Grossman, 1969; \$8.50, but worth hunting up in libraries). The translations are exquisite, the poems delightful—especially the series of frog poems using onomatopoeia (which had better be rehearsed by anyone intending to read them for an audience). Fun for any age.

(3) *Poems to Eat*. Ishikawa Takuboku; translated by Carl Sesar (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1966; worth \$5.00 at your bookstore or from Kodansha International, 10 E. 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10022). Extremely romantic poems—try them on 15-17-year-olds—very well translated.

(4) *This Wine of Peace, This Wine of Laughter: A Complete Anthology of Japan's Earliest Songs*. Translated by Donald Philippi (N.Y.: Grossman, 1968; \$12.50). Contains all the early poems which did not get into the first Japanese imperial anthology, the *Manyōshū*. Illustrates the full range of the early poetry, from country songs to courtly love poems. Beautifully made book with very good translations. Recommended for fairly sophisticated high schoolers and adults.

(5) *Senryu: Japanese Satirical Verses*. R. H. Blyth (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1949; in U.S. order from bookstores through Japan Publications Trading Co., 1255 Howard Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 or 175 Fifth Ave., NYC 10010—or check libraries; moderately expensive). The shorter and more valuable of two books on the subject by Blyth. Features a 50-page comparison of haiku and senryu, with specific examples, plus many poems with adequate translations and good commentary. Playful, good for any age.

(6) *There Are Two Lives: Poems by Children of Japan*. Edited by Richard Lewis; translated by Haruna Kimura (N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1970; \$4.95). Probably the best of Lewis's dozen or so anthologies. Shows a wide range of work (including a good deal of fantasy) from kids aged 6 to 11. Something good for every mood from fear to playfulness. (One notes rather gleefully that the Japanese seem to have gotten away from their own syllabic straight-jackets; no haiku, tanka, or other set forms in this collection.) I have used this book in adult professional-level writing workshops and would happily recommend it for use with all ages.

(7) *The Silent Firefly: Japanese Songs of Love and Other Things*. Translated by Eric Sackheim (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1963; ordering data same as #3.) Somewhat rustic short poems, very nicely translated. Something for most anyone, probably best with teens.

(8) *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*. Translated by Geoffrey Bownas and Anthony Thwaite (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964; \$1.95). The translations are quite good; selections include a fair number of modern poems in free forms. Could be used intelligently at all levels, and definitely the best dollar-value in Japanese poetry that I know.

(9) *Anthology of Modern Japanese Poetry*. Translated by Edith Marcombe Shiffert and Yūki Sawa (Tokyo & Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1972; \$6.05). One of the few decent books on Japanese poetry among the many bad ones from Tuttle. Translations adequate, and the selection covers a wide range of heavily Western-influenced poems in traditional and free forms. Recommended for advanced high school students, and much here could be of use in middle and grade schools.

(10) Finally, *The Haiku Anthology: English Language Haiku by Contemporary American and Canadian Poets*. Edited by Cor van den Heuvel (Garden City: Doubleday/Anchor, 1974; \$2.95). Collects much of the good work by serious poets who have spent some 10 years naturalizing the haiku in English. A number of fine poems, particularly those by Jewell, McClintock, van den Heuvel, Virgil, and Wills, written from settings as diverse as the deserts of the American Southwest and the megalopoli of the North American seaboard. The historical introduction and the definitions of haiku, senryu, haikai, etc., at the back will be helpful to those working with any age level, but remember, this is hardly "kiddy poetry."