



A Ribbon
of Silver Thread

twenty haiku

Joseph Kirschner

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Little Stone Books
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A Ribbon of Silver Thread: twenty haiku
by Joseph Kirschner
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Acknowledgements

To Ed Searl, for his inspiration, encouragement, and incalculable assistance in putting together this book.

To Beverly Bloom, for her gift of sharing and caring in the creation of these haiku.

A Note on the Type

This book is set in OakWood, a shareware font created by Jim Pearson of Raleigh, North Carolina. Pearson's font emulates the very clean, broad-brushed hand-lettering of signs in Raleigh's Historic District. Its handcrafted look suits the haiku form. That it is computer generated echoes the irony inherent in haiku's attempt to put Nature's sensations and human mood into words.

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60 North Main Street
Johnstown, Ohio 43031

When I began to write haiku, I merely knew it as a Japanese poem of seventeen syllables. The spare form disciplined me to be restrained and focused. It seemed obvious that every word had to contribute actively to evoking the particular mood or feeling of the poem. I thought, There is no room for syllables squawking on the page like inert burthens.

for
my daughter, Cindy Ware

Some two years ago, in my good friend Edward Searl, inspired me to assemble some of my haiku--therefore the genesis of this little book. Thus motivated, I began to do some reading on the subject.

Classical Japanese haiku dates only to the late 17th century, its roots, however, extend back to the sixth century in the *choka*, or "long poem", containing anywhere from three to over a hundred twelve sound segments.

English haiku writing is much more recent, dating only to the 1950s in North America. The English haiku form still remains to be sorted out. This is an especially important point to appreciate given

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Introduction

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the problem of cultural translation. One takes a poetic form deeply embedded in Japanese culture and strives to make its universal aspects speak to the poet's own world.

Early in my reading I concluded that haiku must have seventeen syllables and three lines, divided five/seven/five. So, I began reworking some of what previously I had called *haiku*. At least my poems now *looked* authentic. I still felt dissatisfied.

My poetry had become too corseted in form. Only then was I brought to realize that form should be the handmaid of poetry, not its master. Anyway, the five/seven/five formula was meant to apply to Japanese "sound syllables", or *onji*.



Avoiding blind adherence to form is always good advice. Still, if one is to write haiku some attention must be paid to that tradition. Harold G. Henderson, in *Haiku in English* [Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1967], points out four general rules for classical Japanese haiku:

First, there is the seventeen syllable, three line, division mentioned above. Even in classical Japanese haiku this is the rule most commonly broken.

Second, the haiku must contain "at least some reference to nature (other than human nature)." This is traditionally done using "season-words", such as *cherry-blossoms* for spring and *deep cold* for winter. A more elusive example for an American reader would be the expression "visiting the graves," from one of Basho's haiku:

A family--all
leaning on staves and white-haired:
visiting the graves.

The phrase is seasonal because mid-summer is the traditional Japanese time for visiting graves. Here is an allusion quite foreign to the ordinary American experience.

Third, the poem must be about a particular event.

Fourth, the event must be presented as happening now.

Besides following these four general rules, the poem has to evoke some emotion even as it describes the haiku event. Emotions may be gay or grave, deep or shallow, and they may be religious, sad, satirical, humorous, or charming. These universal human emotions are what make it possible for non-Japanese to read traditional haiku, and even write their own.

Thus I offer a fifth rule. A haiku serves as a *starting* point for a train of thought and feeling, deepening and broadening with subsequent readings.



I must mention one other aspect of the haiku tradition, namely, the *haiku moment*. One experiences it as a surprise, an "aha!". For a fleeting instant the person feels a unity and harmony with nature--an intimate connection with something beyond oneself. For example, viewing a withered leaf may awaken sad memories of a once vital relationship now dried up.

In the haiku experience one senses in the most ordinary of settings something at once utterly basic and yet transcendent--particular and universal. A haiku by J.W. Hackett makes the point:

Sweeping into the pan:
the narrow line of dust
that defies its edge.

Here is haiku. Image is image; image is metaphor.

Haiku is about the ordinary. It is direct. Yet, paradoxically, it reaches beyond the ordinary.

In reading the following poems try letting yourself go. Become quiet, open and responsive. Savor accompanying sensations and emotions. Go where they take you.

Don't try too hard to make sense of my twenty haiku. Then they may stimulate responses within you--responses at once terribly ordinary and marvelously transcendent.

twenty haiku

1985-1989

visiting yellow woods
to seek heart's solace;
mud on my shoes

crackling underfoot
dried leaves--
season's greetings

entwined ivy tendrils,
searching for
the stone wall's cracks

listening
by the lagoon ...
only a loon's cry

crumpled notes burning--
glowing red embers
cast long shadows

dusk's fading light--
ravens circling above
skeleton trees

chill November winds
grip an old barn,
dancers twirl faster . . .

bright shoe laces,
pulling to separate them
they hug . . .

driving away.
a ribbon of silver thread
tightens about my heart

shivering in bright sun,
I scrape morning frost;
a robin watches . . .

caw-cawing black crows,
squishing wet tires--
a strange harmony!

raindrops plop on inky puddles
chimes and horns sound in turn--
street-scene combo

blinking, the red vanishes,
leaving only yellow:
not for my eyes?

gentle waves
licking brown reeds . . .
and thin green stalks

faded rainbow scarf
crumpled in a dark corner;
empty room

chilling sea breeze,
bright May sunshine--
a mixed message

though feeling restless,

I stop a while.

a turtle crawls past . . .

tired wanderer
soothed by warming day;
time to rest . . .

gulls circle and cry.
beach grasses gently wave:
land and lake embrace

empty and unmoored
the little boat drifts off,
buoyed by water's whim

Epilogue

Still despite intimations of something larger the
A description of how I compose now may
but in describing it again I seem to have
serve to flesh out what I mean by writing as
a no gentle than meditation that I feel like
meditation. Rarely do I first make up my mind to
write. I sometimes start with a mood such as
and I sometimes start with a mood such as
nostalgic longing. Meditating I try to stay with

I wrote these haiku between 1985 and 1989. As I was writing them I came to experience the craft as a form of meditation. At first I had only a shadowy intimation that I was engaging in a form of spiritual practice. Gradually I came to realize how important for my well-being this practice was during a particularly stressful period in my life.

During those years I was studying for the ministry as well as having entered into a new and long-distance relationship. With this combination came both stress and satisfaction. The emergent feelings ranged between hope and doubt, longing and resentment, loneliness and intimacy. The spiritual practice of writing helped me come to terms with these divergent feelings.



A description of how I compose haiku may serve to flesh out what I mean by writing as meditation. Rarely do I first make up my mind to compose a haiku, then sit down and start to write. I sometimes start with a mood, such as a nostalgic longing. Meditating, I try to stay with

the experience by emptying myself of everything *but* the mood.

Eventually I settle into a relaxed awareness, becoming increasingly aware of the world about me. A sound or an image may come to dominate. It could be a nest perched on a leafless oak tree one chilly, gray January day. Or maybe I am captivated by the sounds of raindrops splattering in puddles on a black asphalt parking lot.

Once some sensation captures my attention, I stay with it. I notice surfacing moods. Then I search for the right words to describe the moment. At such times I am fully present and aware. From this receptive stance I come to intuit something beyond the senses. This linking, the union of particular event and transcendent quality, is the haiku experience.

Still, despite intimations of something larger the haiku event must always be embedded in the particular. I notice that individual nest sitting on a certain branch of the oak tree outside my study window, on that dreary January day--not all such days, but that particular one.

Mystery and Resonance

William J. Higginson [*The Haiku Handbook*, Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1985, p. 38] aptly puts it, if one's language is "utterly clear, stripped of all impediments to sharing," the poem will tap into a related mood in the reader or listener.

For instance, I read a certain haiku by that great Japanese poet, Matsuo Basho, and gain a sense of what he must have felt at that moment.

From this day forth, alas
The dew-drops shall wash away
The letters on my hat
Saying, 'A party of two'.

There is grief and sadness here. One may know nothing of Basho's two-and-a-half-year journey in the deep north of Japan, much less the parting from his close companion, Sora. Still one shares Basho's deep sense of loss. Mysterious, isn't it? Basho and I are separated by some three hundred years and a vast cultural divide. Yet, I resonate with his sadness.

This resonance is spiritual. It is an encounter with a dimension transcending one's own time and place and circumstance. The boundaries of the here and now blur into that sacred space glimpsed by mystics of all the ages.

Creating and assembling this little book of haiku has been spiritual work. The very tightness of the form itself imposed a demanding discipline to focus on the particular haiku event.

Finally, any "closure" one may gain from writing or from reading haiku is never truly final. Haiku always leads to an opening out. It was always meant to be a way of sharing, each reading fleshing out further meaning. By sharing it, the reader becomes a co-creator in an on-going exploration.

Thank you, reader, for joining me in and completing the rewarding process of creating haiku.

A Note on the Author

Joseph Kirschner came of age in New Orleans, a sensual city of piquant food, soulful blues, and intense Nature. He took a first degree from Tulane. After "serving time" as an engineer, he devoted himself to public education. Following a stint in New Jersey public schools, he earned a doctorate from Rutgers. He then taught at universities in Alabama, Kansas, and Ohio--a teacher of teachers. He now lives in Evanston, Illinois, and creatively uses his retirement writing poetry, attending poetry work shops, studying at the C. G. Jung Institute of Chicago, and playing viola in string quartets.

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