

# A Haiku from Scratch: from conception to publication

by Ferris Gilli

Occasionally I hear someone mention a sure-fire “formula” for writing haiku. Although many valuable guidelines exist, with a number of ways a poem may be developed, the truth is there is no exact formula for writing successful haiku. Instead of offering a snake-oil recipe, I invite readers to watch me write a haiku from scratch, using the classic structure. Choosing that form will help me find my central focus, after which I should be able to tweak the work into a finished haiku.

I miss the farmland of my youth very much. I miss my roots. But when I sit quietly in the little haven behind my house, feeling the changing seasons, watching the birds and rabbits that have learned to trust me, I don’t miss “back home” quite as much. It is spring, and the day is nearly over. Things heard at twilight don’t sound the same as at other times. There always seem to be a few minutes of stillness at day’s end, when there is a fading away of harsh noises and strident voices. If we’re very quiet and listen closely just then, we may hear the earth breathing. We may even hear living creatures within the earth.

## Conception

All the birds have gone to roost except for a cardinal drinking from the fountain. The neighbour’s fat white cat watches sleepily from her spot on the stone bench that still holds the sun’s warmth. I sit down on the short, sparse grass beneath a tree and lean close to watch a wasp backing into its hole. That’s when I hear it, something else beneath the grass. A faint *snick . . . snick*, then a tiny *snap*! What in the world can it be? I put my ear to the ground. Hearing the small sounds, at once I have a mental picture of little claws digging and shoving the soil, a pink snout pushing and prodding, a small furry body full of energy and determination. I know what is making the sounds and how they are being made. In the fading light, when I peer in the direction from which they are travelling, I see solid evidence: the small, winding trail of pushed-up soil.

Delighted with my discovery, I am suddenly struck by my own connection

to this little creature. And in that moment, a haiku happens. I sigh with the knowledge and force of it. I am enchanted with knowing that a warm-blooded, living being that is rarely seen by humans is at work in the earth beneath me, that I can hear its progress and know the animal's name. The haiku has practically written itself.

## Joining the Parts

The main part of the haiku comes easily. I simply write exactly what I observed:

**the small sounds of a mole  
breaking grass roots**

At this point, all the haiku lacks is the setting. I want to use a word or phrase that will work well in juxtaposition with the main part. Again the words come easily, because the setting is right there, as I experienced it:

**quiet twilight**

I put the three lines together and see how the whole thing flows:

**quiet twilight  
the small sounds of a mole  
breaking grass roots**

That seems mighty fine to me. It shows just what happened, and I'm pleased with it. But . . . there's more to the story.

## Revising

I wrote that haiku many years ago, and soon afterward submitted it to the editor of a popular haiku journal. It came back to me with, "Sorry, try again". I was surprised, because I had been sure that it would be well received. (I know now that it's useless to try to second-guess editors; we are an unpredictable lot.) At any rate, I filed the haiku, moved on to other things, and forgot about it. Five years later, I dug into my old files, retrieved "quiet twilight" and submitted it to a haiku reading group in order to get constructive criticism. The poem received some positive feedback, and it also received a few suggestions for improving it, including these three:

1. Remove "quiet". The word is redundant, because the fact that someone can actually hear those small sounds implies quietness above ground.
2. Use a different adjective with "twilight", preferably one that indicates the season.
3. Drop "grass". It probably isn't important what kind of roots they are.

So I tried it according to my critics' suggestions:

**spring twilight**  
**the small sounds of a mole**  
**breaking roots**

But it seemed to lack musicality, and I changed "twilight" to "dusk" to create a more appealing rhythm:

**spring dusk**  
**the small sounds of a mole**  
**breaking roots**

The poem was still very dear to me, and I loved remembering the time when I experienced the haiku. I was pleased with the new first line, but I wasn't sure that as a whole the latest version felt right. After leaving it alone for a while, I decided to submit it to a respected haiku journal that reads e-mail submissions. Just before hitting the "send" button, I stopped to read it once more. No, it didn't feel right. It was missing some of its original essence. It was also missing some of what had filled me with the joy of discovery. Perhaps knowing the kind of roots was not important to anyone else, but it was important to me. The phrase "grass roots" has important connotations beyond the immediate image. So I put "grass" back in, thinking, "What the heck, I have to try it". That seemed to improve the rhythm as well.

The poem was accepted on the condition that I would modify it by dropping the word "small". I happily agreed with the editors that "small" told something that readers would be able to infer on their own. This became the published poem:

**spring dusk**  
**the sounds of a mole**  
**breaking grass roots**

*Frogpond 26.2*

Clearly, the production of meaningful haiku, with the genre's infinitely variable combinations of subject matter and other elements, cannot be reduced to a simple formula. Well aware that self-editing is crucial, I also leave myself open to suggestions from editors and other poets. Still, only I can know for certain if a finished haiku contains the essence of my moment, and I keep that in mind during any revision.

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