

## Narratives of the Heart: Haibun

by Bruce Ross

fleas, lice—  
a horse urinating  
next to my pillow!

—Bashō

this world of dew  
is only a world of dew—  
and yet, and yet . . .

—Issa

One may wonder what were the circumstances surrounding Bashō's humorous, but unfortunate, encounter with insects and the horse and Issa's poignant reflection on mortality. We of course know the circumstances because of the classical form of autobiographical poetic prose that incorporates poetry, haibun. In Bashō's travel diary *Narrow Path to the Interior* (1694), a classic of world literature, we find how Bashō found himself in such lowly lodgings, and in Issa's *My Spring* (1819), a two-year journal of his life, we find that Issa is grieving over the loss of his young daughter.

When I was president of the Haiku Society of America I had two goals. One was to promote the haibun form and the other was to encourage the educational awareness of haiku, haibun, and other related Japanese poetic forms. I realized these goals by publishing the first non-Japanese haibun anthology, *Journey to the Interior, American Versions of Haibun* (1998) and *How to Haiku, A Student's Guide to Haiku and Related Forms* (2001). I continued these goals by becoming co-editor with Jim Kacian of the journal *American Haibun & Haiga* (1999). One of my initial thoughts in wishing to realize these goals was that new writers of haiku might get a better understanding of the sensibility underlying haiku by following a prose account of the circumstances surrounding a haiku. Since then I have come to appreciate, through my own attempts at the form and my reading of others' work in the form, that the prose and poetry of a haibun together provide a unified poetic expression. In other words, a haibun is not simply a narrative with an appended haiku.

I have been told by a Japanese professor that in Japan haibun is considered a classical form and is no longer practiced there. Be that as it may, and we must qualify this statement in a moment with reference to modern Japanese literature, let us look at a few examples of where haibun came from.

A good example of the classical haibun is an entry from Ki no Tsurayuki's *The Tosa Diary* (935) which chronicles the return of a court official from an assignment in Tosa back to Kyoto, the capital:

18<sup>th</sup> February, 13<sup>th</sup> day. At daybreak the rain was gently falling but then it stopped and we all went to the nearby place for a hot bath. I looked over the sea and composed the following poem:

the clouds overhead  
look like rippling waves to me;  
if the pearl divers were here  
“Which is sea, which is sky?”  
I’d ask and they’d answer

So, since it was after the tenth day, the moon was especially beautiful. After all these days, since I first came on board the ship, I have never worn my striking bright red costume because I feared I might offend the God of the Sea. Yet . . .

We notice the very light tone in which this diary entry is expressed. It is in fact a poetic flow of sensibility. The red costume and the humor of the tanka particularly support that tone. And we see how the tanka is composed and linked to the narrative: the narrator looks out to sea and noticed the clouds overhead. Thus he created a simile that compared the clouds to the sea and then had some fun with his simile. Such linking of poetry to prose is part of the Japanese literary tradition. Perhaps the first novel in world literature, Murasaki Shikibu’s *The Tale of Genji* (c. 1000), uses the exchange of tanka as a narrative device in its fictional prose account of the ways of court sensibility.

With the period of Bashō, came what is known as the haikai style of writing, a less literary and more homespun manner of writing in general. Look at the light, playful tone in Bashō’s “A Ball of Snow” (1686):

My friend Sora had moved in nearby, and we visit each other anytime, night or day. While I am preparing a meal, he breaks up branches for the fire; when I boil tea, he breaks up ice for the water. He likes the solitary life and our friendship is as strong as iron. One night after a snowfall he came visiting:

you make the fire  
and I’ll show you something wonderful:  
a big ball of snow!

Notice how the prose “I”/“he” parallelism is repeated in the haiku’s “you”/“I’ll” but in a reversed order and how the surprise and whimsy of the haiku’s last line opens up and extends the sensibility evoked in the haibun.

Now haibun is a worldwide form taking various modes of expression. To name several examples, there are: the New Zealander Richard von Sturmer’s *A Network of Dissolving Threads* (1991); the Russian Alexey Andreyev’s *Moyayama, Russian Haiku: A Diary* (1997), the Croatian Vladimir Devide’s *Haibun, Words & Pictures* (1997); and the Romanian Ion Codrescu’s *A Foreign Guest* (1999) and *Mountain Voices* (2000). Most experimentation with the form, however, has been in the United States, although the first published North American haibun seems to be the Canadian Jack Cain’s “Paris” (1964). An early example is Gary

Snyder's diary as a fire-spotter in *earth house hold* (1957). Another figure in the so-called Beat School, like Snyder, was Jack Kerouac who experimented with the application of haibun values to the novel. Sections of his *Desolation Angels* (1965) contain prose narrative segments accompanied by relevant haiku that complete or expand the segments. The Canadian Rod Wilmot in *Ribs of Dragonfly* (1984) presented in a highly dense prose style a fictionalized account of a love affair with relevant haiku appended in groups at the end of each chapter. Such attempts harken back to *The Tale of Genji's* overture and the fiction of Natsume Soseki (1867-1916), such as *The Three Cornered World*, that incorporated a haiku and a haiku sensibility to fictionalized narrative. Shiki's (1867-1902) incorporation of tanka into his personal diary entries is also suggested. D.D. Lliteras has produced a trilogy of novels (1992-1994) with a somewhat Zennian tone in the haibun form and David G. Lanoue has recently authored *Haiku Guy* (2001), an account of a fictitious student of Issa that explores the writing of haiku. In line with Snyder's diary and directly linking to Bashō's *Narrow Path to the Interior* in its travel journal sections on nature as well as interesting characters and situations encountered on the road is Tom Lynch's *Rain Drips from the Trees, Haibun along the trans-Canadian Highway* (1992).

Haibun is now obviously an open form. I had once defined that form, reaching for the deepest connection such a form could hold, as a "narrative of an epiphany." This definition was juxtaposed to the accompanying definition of haiku as "an epiphany," making here a distinction between haibun haiku and other haiku. I have often thought that there was a need for something like haibun in English-language and world literature, notwithstanding the presence of prose poetry. I had in mind what Wordsworth was after in *The Prelude* and Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*. But what was needed was that special relationship between a poignant poem, say haiku, and a poignantly expressed poetic prose narrative.

For one aspect of such prose and poetry linking, one might look to the haikai style of linking one verse to the next in a renga or the image to the haiku in a haiga, as opposed to a solitary haiku that stands alone in a sense of completion.

It seems to me, as an editor of contemporary haibun, that two things need to be considered in writing haibun. The first is to avoid a too prosaic and plodding narrative as if one were simply writing a narrative account. The second, which derives from the first, is the issue of sensibility. The narrative should be a flow of sensibility, of haikai style, if you will, that incorporates the haiku accompanying it in that sensibility. That said, there is room for all manner of approaches and subjects in haibun: nature, urban, simple narrative, travel, diary, dreams, expressionistic, dreams, persons, places, things, love, death, etc.

There also seems to be a spectrum of latitude in haibun, from the dense, "high"-dictioned, deep, serious, postmodern style of William M. Ramsey as in his "Prayer for the Soul of a Mare," which is collected in my *Journey to the Interior, American Versions of Haibun*, to the simple, naive, colloquial style of Sally Secor's "A Garden Bouquet," which is collected in *up against the window*, the first volume of *American Haibun & Haiga* (1999).

Overall, there seems to be three important issues that need to be discussed in relation to contemporary haibun: Which comes first in haibun composition, the prose or the haiku? What are the implications for haibun of haikai-style prose? What are the implications of linking haiku and prose in haibun?

I had organized a forum on haibun at the 2001 meeting of Haiku North America in Boston at which I brought up these questions for discussion. I introduced each question by reading from discussions over these issues that were posted on the World Haiku Forum. With regard to whether prose or haiku come first in haibun composition, Allison Williams notes that she is

“most happy when the haiku and prose seem to come as a whole rather than either prose first or haiku first.” Paul Conneally disagreed with the findings of the British Haiku Society that a haiku usually comes first and that this makes for a better haibun and felt Allison’s view was closer to the truth, stressing the value of retaining a sense of immediacy in the prose narrative. He suggested that journal haiku might put one back to the experience and writing the prose account would generate more haiku. Marjorie Buettner concurs and suggests that writing a haiku before the haibun would “feel awkward . . . and artificial.” Debi Bender also concurs that her haiku and tanka formulate after the prose but adds, echoing Alison, that often “the genus of the haiku and the story or narrative seem to mull about together as a unit and appear together.” During the discussion of this issue at Haiku North America both panel members and other attendees seemed to in general favor the prose as coming first, although there was a strong insistence on an organic relation between prose and haiku, sometimes coming from different experiences. Nonetheless, my proposed definition of haibun as a “narrative of an epiphany” covers this approach by emphasizing the prose narrative’s importance. Left undecided, the general view seems to be that haibun is first and foremost a narrative that is presented as prose although the prose and the accompanying haiku are often formulated together at the time of or out of the narrative event. This makes good sense since narrative is at the heart of haibun, however experimental it becomes.

The second question focuses on the prose itself. Bob Spiess, editor of *Modern Haiku*, once told a haibun writer that a haiku makes or breaks a haibun. One senses the wisdom in this. But this issue is better looked at under the issue of linking. As an editor of an anthology of haibun and a co-editor of a journal of haibun, I find that too little attention is paid to the nature of the prose. The two biggest problems seem to be plodding, tonally flat narrative and stylistic sentimentality rather than sentiment. After all, haibun is, according to its haikai roots, composed in a poetic style. A haibun is meant to be a poetic experience in its inception, composition, and reception. Paul Conneally, accordingly, prefers prose that has the characteristics of haiku: “present tense (and shifts of tense though predominant voice in the ‘present’), imagistic, shortened or interesting syntax, joining word such as ‘and’ limited maybe, a sense of ‘being there’, descriptions of places & people met and above all ‘brevity’.” Susumu Takiguchi emphasizes the need to focus on the nature of such poetic prose by warning that there are “pseudo-haibun” that are “no more than long-winded haiku in disguise.” So haibun prose should be haiku-like but not an “expanded” haiku. At the Haiku North America haibun panel there seemed to be a consensus that haibun prose should be “poetic.” I have noticed two successful prose styles in English-language haibun, both of which incorporate the haikai values. One is a dense, “high” dictioned, deep, serious style, often postmodern in its attempts to mediate the spiritual malaise surrounding us. The writer William M. Ramsey characterizes this style as in his “Prayer for the Soul of a Mare” which is collected in my *Journey to the Interior, American Versions of Haibun*. The other is a simple, naive, colloquial style, often written out of a simple faith in and acceptance of the nature of things. Sally Secor’s “A Garden Bouquet” and Cyril Child’s “Pantry Shelf,” both collected in *up against the window, American Haibun & Haiga*, Volume 1, are good examples. In responding to a question about haiku embedded within haibun prose posted on the World Haiku Forum, Paul Conneally notes: “I think the whole thing is about balance – prose-poetry – not just prose.” He then characterizes such haikai prose in Bashō’s *Narrow Path to the Interior* as opposed to “classical,” “vulgar,” and “mundane” prose. If one needs an example of a master’s haikai style of haibun here it is.

Of the question of linking haiku to prose in haibun, the use of analogy is helpful. Paul Conneally suggests one should link haiku to prose “‘renku’ style – not a direct carry on from

the prose telling some of which has already been said – no – it should lead us on – let our mind wander more, start travelling. Linking by ‘scent’ will be greatly valued!” Anyone who has participated in a renga will understand how perfectly that form’s linking procedures apply to haibun. I once offered a haiku of mine about an abandoned house and blossoming lilacs to Kaji Aso at his studio in Boston . His haiga consisted of flowing kanji and kana for the haiku and off to one side a simple drawing of a sprig of lilacs. During the haibun panel I presented this analogy from haiga as well as other examples of haiga linking, some more direct, some more subtle. The discussion that ensued was a tug of war between proponents of privileging the prose and those of privileging the haiku in linking. I spoke of a gestalt of linking that incorporated both the prose and haiku and resolved the issue in the concept of “privileging the link.” By so “privileging the link” the haibun avoids the various pitfalls of haibun writing and becomes a true haikai or “poetic” style of writing.

More and more writers worldwide are becoming fulfilled as writers through this wonderful form, this “narrative of an epiphany.” I can only see infinite possibility in the future for haibun and an opening that will provide a lasting and renewed contribution to world literature.

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