

Haiku: From Bashō to English¹

by Hiroaki Sato

Some years ago, during another one of those crises in U.S.-Japanese relations, there was an article in *The New York Times*—I think it was—about an officer of The Embassy of Japan, who used haiku in his bulletin in an attempt to redirect Washingtonians' attention from such low-down pecuniary matters as trade with Japan to something more elevated: poetry. Today, I have no such highfalutin hope. My only hope, indeed, is that you might have an amusing moment or two in the course of my unfocused, meandering discourse.

Haiku has completely become a part of American life. Last week, for example, I was on a program called “Where Haiku and Music Meet,” in which Kashiwagi Toshio explained how he set haiku to piano music and Inaba Chieko played his compositions.² Before the program I had asked a friend of mine, Arlene Teck, to give me her assessment of the presentation afterward. She did, and did so in a haiku:

musician's face:
expressing the emotions
of the music

¹ This essay is based on a speech originally given at the Japan Information & Culture Center, Embassy of Japan, in Washington, D.C., on May 25, 1994. The speech was then printed in *Introducing Modern Japan: Lecture Series: Volume III, 1994*, pp. 29-42.

² Presented in New York, on May 17, 19, and 20, 1994.

Arlene is vice president of a company that specializes in devising brand names for pharmaceutical and other products, and I have known her for quite some time. What I still do not know is whether or not she takes haiku seriously. I say this because there *are* people who do. The Canadian haiku poet Paul O. Williams is one of them.

Two years ago, Mr. Williams, who I hear is also known as a writer of science fiction, gave a speech entitled “The Question of Words in Haiku,”³ and opened his remarks with these observations:

“Haiku is often a poetry written around the edges of the consciousness of the poet. And haiku helps poets extend the borders of their attention to notice what is going on at the edge of the eye. . . . If effective, it does not represent official consciousness, demanded or conventional consciousness, occupational consciousness.”

Mr. Williams went on to speak of “the comparative absence in haiku of witty verbal acts.” This talk of “consciousness” in relation to haiku is clearly influenced by Daisetz Suzuki (1870-1966), the greatest proselytizer of Zen in this country, and R. H. Blyth (1898-1964), the greatest proselytizer of haiku in the English-speaking world. Of the two, Suzuki said, in *Zen and Japanese Culture*, “a *haiku* does not express ideas but . . . puts forward images reflecting intuitions. These images are not figurative representations made use of by the poetic mind, but they directly point to original intuitions, indeed, they are intuitions themselves.”⁴ Blyth, who acknowledged his indebtedness to

3 *Frogpond*, Vol. XVI: 2, 1993, pp. 47-54.

4 Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 240.

Suzuki,⁵ spoke of the “directness, simplicity and unintellectuality” of haiku, asserting that “haiku is a form of Zen”—although it would not be fair to fail to note that he followed this with the declaration: “if there is ever imagined to be any conflict between Zen and the poetry of haiku, the Zen goes overboard.”⁶

Notwithstanding the influences of two such greats, however, the suggestion that the act of composing haiku is an almost *unconscious* one and that witticism is nearly absent in this literary genre would have startled Matsuo Bashō (1644-94), the first poet most people think of when the word “haiku” is mentioned. This I say not because of the trite observation I can proffer to the effect that virtually no literary endeavor can be unconscious. Rather, the haiku during Bashō’s days was occasional verse⁷ *par excellence*. (The term “occasional verse” is not used often these days, but the poem Maya Angelou composed for and recited at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton is an occasional poem; so is “Greetings, Friends,” which Roger Angell every year composes for the end-of-the-year issue of *The New Yorker*. The latter, as you know, attempts to incorporate as many personal names in the news as is manageable in “airy cols of rhyme.” The poem last year, for example, had two lines, “Harris Wofford, Kirkpatrick Sale, / Harrison Ford, and Pauline Kael.”)

How, in what way, was haiku occasional verse?

5 R. H. Blyth, *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* (The Hokuseido Press, 1942), p. xi.

6 Blyth, *Haiku, Vol. I: Eastern Culture* (The Hokuseido Press, 1949), p. v.

7 Or what Mallarmé called *vers de circonstance*. For this term I am indebted to Nakamura Shin’ichirō, who brings it up in discussing kanshi of Ōkubo Shibutsu (1767-1837) in *Rai San’yō to sono Jidai, II* (Chūō Kōron Sha, 1976), pp. 314-315, and to Michael O’Brien, who promptly showed me samples.

The answer lies in the fact that in Bashō's days the haiku had not yet become completely independent of another poetic form. Not independent? Another poetic form? you might ask.

Yes. In a most peculiar development in poetic forms anywhere, the haiku originally—in Bashō's days still—was the opening section of the sequential poetic form known as renga, “linked verse,” which alternates 5-7-5- and 7-7-syllable units up to fifty times. Normally composed by two or more persons, renga, in fact, was a literary game and, being a game, had a number of rules. Of these rules, which were highly complex, the basic one for the opening verse, called *hokku*—the term *haiku* gained currency only in the early part of this century—was *tōki*, *tōza*, “this season, this session”—the requirement that it must incorporate a reference to the season when the session for the game is held *and* that it must describe something observable at the session.

Take Bashō's hokku that Mr. Williams cites as a perfect embodiment of his—Mr. Williams'—concept of haiku.

木のもとに汁も鱒も櫻かな

Under a tree both soup and fish salad have cherry flowers⁸

Despite the somewhat unfamiliar “fish salad,” you might feel that this, at least in the original, can be an innocuously pretty line of verse if you learn that it describes a scene in a *hanami*, “cherry-blossom-viewing session,” in which an assortment of tidbits, along with an ample supply of sake, is taken out picnic-style under blooming cherry trees. No matter how innocuous it may

⁸ Mr. Williams cites this in Blyth's translation: “Beneath the tree, / In soup, in fish salad, — / Cherry blossoms!”

seem, though, this hokku could not have been “written around the edges of the consciousness of the poet.” Bashō made a living as a *sōshō*, “master,” of rule-bound renga poetry, and had to take many things into account—especially when composing a hokku, “the opening verse.”

First, there was the season. Bashō composed this hokku early in the third month, by the lunar calendar the last month of spring. The proposed title for the session was *hanami* no less, so mentioning or at least suggesting *sakura*, “cherry” or “cherry blossoms,” was a must—although here I must hasten to add that to speak of a title for a renga sequence is misleading. Renga is a poetic form which is mightily peculiar—I am tempted to say “unique” but the Japanese are roundly ridiculed in this country for saying that something about themselves—let’s say, a cultural manifestation—is *unique*, so I must refrain from using the word. Renga is peculiar because its basic rule is what Prof. Earl Miner, of Princeton, has termed “disjunctive linking”: Any two consecutive links or stanzas must make sense, but three may not. This means that the subject for description must change at every other turn. In consequence, a renga cannot and does not have a linear narrative line, as, say, an English ballad does.⁹ Indeed, when we speak of a *title* for a renga, we are talking about something that applies only to the opening verse or the notion that has prompted a particular session.

So, there was, first, the seasonal requirement—with the word or phrase indicating a specific season, which is called *kigo* or *kidai*. There was nothing strange about this, because the seasonal requirement was an integral part of Japanese poetry in court or aristocratic tradition, which was mainly written in the 5-7-5-7-7-syllable tanka form. The general impression you gain that the Japanese love nature derives mainly from the fact that a seasonal reference is

⁹ At times, however, a sequence may have an overall theme, such as “love.”

found in most poems written in traditional forms and, by extension, in idle essays, epistolary greetings, and crafts designs.

(Whether or not the Japanese actually *love* nature is a question that deserves contemplation. Kurt Singer, 1886-1962, an astute German observer of Japanese culture, characterized “the Japanese claim to be closer to nature than the people of the West” as “paradoxical,” saying that large doses of “convention, artificiality, and selectiveness enter into the Japanese cult of nature.”¹⁰ My friend Roger Pulvers, a Brooklyn-born Australian citizen who has done much of his work in Japan, unintentionally seconded this judgment when he wrote to me that nature, for the Japanese, is nature viewed and defined from indoors. From casual observation, in any event, it is doubtful that the Japanese can claim any special love of nature. Traditional Japanese gardening strikes me as an exercise in excessive pruning, bonsai as tortuous stunting. Meanwhile, corporate brochures and other pictorial presentations coming out of Japan continue to show *proudly* expanses of coastland or mountains cleared, wasted, and leveled for or buried under state-of-the-art factories or power plants. In this regard, Japan still behaves like a developing nation.)

I digress.

To go back to the subject of hokku, there was, second, a highly advanced sense of decorum that was assumed. The requirement that the hokku describe “this season, this session” meant that it had to be complimentary or *positively* commemorative of the occasion. This explains why with most classical hokku you have the feeling, which is correct, that they are in praise

10 Kurt Singer, *Mirror, Sword and Jewel: The Geometry of Japanese Life* (Croom Helm, 1973; Kodansha International, 1981), p. 35.

of something. The tradition lives on powerfully. Several years ago, for instance, the poet Takahashi Mutsuo (born 1937) was commissioned to compose a series of haiku about Kanazawa, as well as Ishikawa, of which Kanazawa is the capital city. The result was *Kanazawa Hyakku* (One Hundred Haiku about Kanazawa), which is accompanied by a separate volume explicating each piece, called *Kaga Hyakkei* (One Hundred Views of Kaga).¹¹ Kaga is an old name for Ishikawa. In this country, one might be commissioned to compile an anthology of poems about—not necessarily in praise of—New York, let’s say, but one can hardly expect to be commissioned to write a whole series of poems in exaltation of Gotham.

Where a strong guest/host relationship existed among the people gathered to compose renga, the sense of decorum was readily linked to the notion of *aisatsu*, “salutation,” as an ingredient of the hokku, which was, as you can imagine, based on protocol. The famed translator of Japanese literature Edward Seidensticker not long ago testily remarked, “Honorifics represent a very unpleasant aspect of Japanese culture: everything is up or down.”¹² Without taking issue with the eminent professor, I submit that protocol, of which honorifics are merely a linguistic manifestation, is no less important in old European tradition than in the old Asian nation of Japan, and that the English language also has, I believe, a range of expressions indicative of protocol.

What is interesting for our purpose here is that when protocol was brought into the poetic form of renga, it affected the nature of the hokku, the opening verse, and the second verse, which is called *waki*. The hokku being

¹¹ Published as a set by Chikuma Shobō in 1993.

¹² “Seidensticker Gives Bay Area Translators the Lowdown on the Perils of Translating *Genji*,” by Alan Gleason. *The JLD Times*, the newsletter of the Japanese Language Division of the American Translators Association (April 1994, Vol. 3, No. 2), p. 15.

the most important part of the sequence, its composition was usually assigned to the guest of honor, often a master, and this enhanced the complimentary or celebratory aspect of the hokku. In turn, the composition of the second piece, the waki, was assigned to the host of the occasion, who was expected to say something self-deprecating.

Put this way, and since we are dealing with poetry, which is supposed to be an embodiment of truth and beauty, this arrangement may strike you as faked, insincere, Japanese style, if you will. But renga was a game, and the situation may be understood by imagining a conversation between guest and host in a more traditional setting.

Let us say you buy a particularly attractive piece of furniture, install it in a prominent spot, and invite a guest. The guest arrives, takes due note of it, and obligingly compliments you by saying something like, “It matches the color scheme of your living room perfectly. I love it!” In response, you underplay the furniture’s importance to you by mumbling, “Oh, it’s nothing. I just stumbled upon it in a garage sale.” (This analogy, of course, may *not* work in the United States because, as host, you, being American, are more likely to say something like, “I spent zillions of hours finding it. I’m *proud* of it!”)

The guest-host relationship in renga may be illustrated by the most famous haiku of all time, the one about an old pond and a frog or frogs, although in that instance Bashō was at once master and host. In saying,

古池や蛙飛び込む水の音

An old pond: a frog jumps into the water the sound

Bashō, being the host, was deprecating himself, telling his guests that he was so destitute that all he could offer by way of entertainment was the occasional

sound of a frog plopping into a stagnant pool of water. In response, Enomoto Kikaku (1661-1707), one of a group of his students who were visiting him, came up with a 7-7-syllable waki:

葦の若葉にかかる蜘蛛の巣

suspended over young rush blades a spider's web

In effect, Kikaku was saying, “No, sir, this is a wonderful place. Everything is so quiet and peaceful.”

In the hokku under scrutiny, “Under a tree both soup and fish salad have cherry flowers,” the guest-host relationship is not strong. It is nonetheless a typical hokku—indicating as it does the season, which is spring, through a specific plant and complimenting the scene at hand through a laudatory image. Bashō used this hokku to start two renga sequences, once early in the third month, the second time later the same month. The second sequence is the more famous, and I myself have translated it,¹³ so here, I would look at the first sequence—though only the waki, the second unit. A samurai named Ogawa Fūbaku (d. 1700) wrote the 7-7:

明日来る人はくやしがる春

someone who comes tomorrow will miss the spring¹⁴

Fūbaku's verse is based on the traditional poetic conceit that for appreciating cherry blossoms, which bloom suddenly, spectacularly, and then scatter with

13 H. Sato and Burton Watson, tr., *From the Country of Eight Islands: An Anthology of Japanese Literature* (Doubleday, 1981; Columbia, 1986), pp. 297-300.

14 Shimasue Kiyoshi, ed., *Bashō Renku Zen-chūkai*, Vol. 7 (Ōfūsha, 1982), p. 43.

sheer abandon, tomorrow is always one day too late. Viewed this way, Bashō's hokku does not—cannot possibly—suggest the poet's "irritation," as Mr. Williams proposes. Such an interpretative speculation is strictly modernist.

The mention of Mr. Williams brings us to a third aspect of the kind of hokku (and, of course, renga) that Bashō composed. As you recall, Mr. Williams spoke of "the comparative absence in haiku of witty verbal acts." In fact, "witty verbal acts" were *the* essence of what Bashō and his friends were doing. They characterized the type of renga they wrote as *haikai*, "humorous," in order to distinguish it from orthodox renga based on court tradition. In simplest terms, haikai meant rejection of poetic diction and adoption of language in daily use. Orthodox court poetry did not tolerate reference to vulgar, quotidian things like *shiru*, "soup," and *namasu*, "fish salad," so introducing them was haikai. As Bashō himself is said to have explained, *harusame no yanagi*, "willow in spring rain," represented the world of court poetry, but *tanishi toru karasu*, "a crow picking pond snails," was haikai.¹⁵ You may be able to get an inkling of this notion by imagining someone using a four-letter word in an elegant soirée; it will be out of place, disconcerting, and, therefore, humorous.

More broadly, haikai derived from attitudinal and allusive twists. As for the attitudinal part of it, again Bashō himself is said to have explained, in reference to his own hokku,

五月雨や鴉の浮き巣を見にゆかん

In the May rains let us go to see the grebes' floating nests

¹⁵ *Sanzōshi*, compiled by Hattori Tohō (1657-1730).

that the language does not contain anything unorthodox, but that the hokku is haikai because the proposal to go out in the rain to look at the grebes' nests is unorthodox and, therefore, haikai.¹⁶

As for the other, allusive twists, this is where scholastic speculation plays an important role. Since by now you must be bored stiff, I shall not aggravate the situation by citing poems to which Bashō *might* have alluded when he composed “Under a tree both soup and fish salad have cherry flowers.” Instead, I would simply say he was superimposing new, quotidian images on more elegant ones. The suggestion is also made that this hokku alludes to the proverb, *Atsumono ni korite namasu o fuku*, “Someone burnt by hot soup blows on fish salad,” which is the equivalent of “Once bit, twice shy.” In this view, the haikai twist lies in Bashō’s wry proposition that a carpet of cherry blossoms has rendered soup and fish salad indistinguishable.¹⁷

All this spiel so far is merely to say that hokku in Bashō’s days were utterly *conscious* affairs—be the consciousness official, demanded, conventional, occupational.

William George Aston (1841-1911), who translated and wrote about Japanese literature while working as a British foreign service officer in Japan, published, posthumously, in 1899, *A History of Japanese Literature*, most likely the first such account by a non-Japanese.¹⁸ In the section on Bashō in this book, Aston quoted a Latin phrase, *brevis esse laborat, obscurus fit*, which my poet friend Michael O’Brien tells me comes from the Roman poet Horace’s *Art of Poetry* and means, “Striving to be brief, he becomes obscure.”

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Andō Tsuguo, *Fūkyō Yoin* (Chikuma Shobō, 1990), pp. 161-162.

¹⁸ Reissued by Tuttle, in 1973.

Aston followed this Horatian quote with an observation: “A very large proportion of Bashō’s Haikai are so obscurely allusive as to transcend the comprehension of the uninitiated foreigner.”¹⁹ In all, he cited less than ten as among “the more lucid” of the about 1,000 hokku Bashō has left us. If you read Bashō in the original without much explication and annotation, you will certainly agree with Aston.

Scholars of Aston’s generation had a range of classical training and a wonderful capacity to learn foreign things, yet happily refused to display what I would call anthropological even-handedness, which is *de rigueur* for scholars today. So, Aston did not hesitate to observe: “It would be absurd to put forward any serious claim on behalf of Haikai to an important position in literature.”²⁰ (Here Aston uses the term haikai to mean hokku.) When you consider the Horatian quote coupled with this low estimation, it is a safe bet that while writing the *History*, he never even dreamed of the transplantability of the hokku outside Japan.

Three generations later, an eminent student of classical Japanese poetry who *did* think about that transplantability came to a negative conclusion. It was Earl Miner, who, in the 1965 edition of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, said, “haiku is too reduced a form and grows too complexly out of its cultural background to be adaptable as a whole into Western languages.” His judgment on actual haiku written in English and other languages was accordingly harsh; they were, he said, “almost invariably . . . trivial.”

The interesting thing, of course, is that, though this is being a little tautological, Prof. Miner’s judgment was possible precisely because the haiku

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 294.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 294.

had already been adapted outside Japan by then. Or, you can put it this way: Even as Kurt Singer, the perceptive German soul I mentioned earlier, was counting the haiku among Japanese cultural phenomena that lacked “emissive power,”²¹ it had already been *emitted*.

How French and English writers and poets began to accept haiku, beginning around the turn of the century—though today this expression makes us somewhat uneasy because we are approaching the end of another millennium—has been recounted a number of times. Here, let us take a different tack and recall how J. D. Salinger (born 1919), in *Seymour: An Introduction*, first published in 1959, had its narrator say the following:

. . . The great Issa will joyfully advise us that there’s a fat-faced peony in the garden. (No more, no less. Whether we go to see his fat-faced peony for ourselves is another matter; unlike certain prose writers and Western poetasters, whom I’m in no position to name off, he doesn’t police us.) The very mention of Issa’s name convinces me that the true poet has no choice of material. The material plainly chooses him, not he it. A fat-faced peony will not show itself to anyone but Issa. . . .²²

Issa here is Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827), one of the triumvirate of haiku in the classical period. Let us recall also how lovingly the narrator goes on to describe the last two of the 184 haiku that Seymour, who committed suicide, is supposed to have left:

²¹ *Mirror, Sword and Jewel*, pp. 101-103.

²² J. D. Salinger, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* and *Seymour: An Introduction* (Little Brown, 1991), p. 121.

The next-to-last poem is about a young married woman and mother who is plainly having what it refers to here in my old marriage manual as an extramarital love affair. . . . She comes home very late one night from a tryst . . . to find a balloon on her bedspread. . . . The other poem . . . is about a young suburban widower who sits down on his patch of lawn one night . . . to look at the full moon. A bored white cat . . . comes up to him and rolls over, and he lets her bite his left hand as he looks at the moon.²³

These are, I note, the explications of haiku, not the haiku themselves. As the narrator confides in his nervy sort of way, “I’m forbidden by the poet’s widow, who legally owns them, to quote any portion of” the 184 poems.²⁴ (Elizabeth Bishop, who “hated” this story, said: “It took me days to go through it, gingerly, a page at a time, and blushing with embarrassment for him every ridiculous sentence of the way. . . . And if the poems were so good, why not just give us one or two and shut up, for God’s sake?”²⁵ Three thumbs up for Elizabeth Bishop!) Anyhow, these explications, along with the preceding definition of haiku, conveniently show how much “emissive power” haiku had.

The narrator of *Seymour*—Salinger, really—makes clear that Seymour’s source of inspiration on the haiku form and what it can and should do was R. H. Blyth, whose four-volume account, simply entitled *Haiku*, was published from 1949 to 1952. He, the narrator, characterizes Blyth as “sometimes perilous, naturally, since he’s a highhanded old poem himself, but he’s also

²³ Ibid., pp. 128-129.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 126.

²⁵ *One Art: Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), p. 375.

sublime—and who goes to poetry for safety anyway?”²⁶ It may well be that a great portion of American people who decided to turn to haiku in the last three decades did so as much on account of Salinger as on account of Blyth.

You may wonder: Which haiku on peony by Issa was the narrator of *Seymour* talking about? I did wonder. By some embarrassing oversight, however, I do not have all of Blyth’s four-volume *Haiku*, though I have some others by him, so I checked Japanese texts and found the following:

此れ程と牡丹の仕方する子哉

“This big,” a child gestures about the peony she saw

This may not be the one about “a fat-faced peony in the garden,” but peony as a haiku subject gives me a chance to briefly touch on the great change that occurred to hokku during the hundred- to hundred-fifty-year period from Bashō to Issa. As I indicated at the beginning, in Bashō’s days hokku were still linked to renga or *formal* considerations associated with the linkage, but by Issa’s time the link had become extremely tenuous. This does not mean that Issa did not participate in renga sessions, because he did, or that *all* of his hokku—he is estimated to have left 50,000 pieces—are readily intelligible, because a number of them are not. Still, when you compare this piece by Issa with the following by Bashō, you may see the difference:

寒からぬ露や牡丹の花の蜜

Dew that won’t be cold: the honey in the peony flower

26 Ibid., p. 118.

What does this mean? Well, Bashō wrote this in celebration of the new house a friend of his built. “Dew” is a seasonal word for autumn and a metaphor for sadness and desolation; “peony,” on the other hand, is a seasonal word for summer and a metaphor for munificence and generosity. To paraphrase, Bashō is saying, “Your new house is so luxurious. As its resident, you won’t have to worry about feeling desolate when autumn comes.” Or at least that’s one interpretation. As a noted commentator has said, the actual meaning of this hokku is difficult to decipher²⁷—a typical case to which Horace’s maxim applies: “Striving to be brief, he becomes obscure.” The point, at any rate, is that a similar conclusion can be drawn by comparing many of the hokku by Bashō and Issa—that Bashō is *formal* while Issa is free and casual and his pieces are that much closer to what most of us today perceive to be haiku.

In my concluding section, I’d like to bring up two topics on which I am often questioned when I talk about haiku in English and Japanese. One has to do with the form, the other with the content, of the haiku.

As to the form, are haiku in English all “three-line, seventeen-syllable haiku”²⁸—to quote Salinger once again? The answer is, Yes, in most cases when haiku is used in English composition classes, but outside the classrooms, not really. There is at least one organization, called Yūki Teikei, that requires its members to write in the three-line, seventeen-syllable format, but the majority of haiku writers, at least in the United States, do not seem to follow the designated syllabic count. O. Mabson Southard is among the few accomplished haiku writers who seems to write consistently in the set count:

27 Yamamoto Kenkichi, *Bashō Zen-Hokku, Ge* (Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 1974), p. 298.

28 *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*, p. 126-127.

Across the still lake
through upcurls of morning mist—
the cry of a loon²⁹

But most write like John Wills (1921-1993), the most admired
American writer of “nature haiku.”

honeysuckle . . .
and for each blossom
a bee

river bluff . . .
a hawk sails out drops down
over the pines³⁰

Mr. Paul O. Williams belongs to the majority:

wind fills the air
with this year’s leaves—
all perfect leaves³¹

The reason for this development is that if you use seventeen syllables in
English, you tend to say more than what you can in Japanese, which is a

29 Con van den Heuvel, ed., *The Haiku Anthology* (Simon & Schuster, 1984).

30 John Wills, *Mountain* (S.E. Publishing, 1993).

31 Bruce Ross, ed., *Haiku Moment* (Tuttle, 1993).

polysyllabic language. The question asked is: If you remove the syllabic requirement, can the result still be a haiku? This is a tough question to answer, when a Japanese asks it. But in English, I can simply point out that the removal earlier in this century of metrical and rhyming requirements did not spell the end of poetry.

Then, there's the matter of lines—three lines, to be exact. You, being astute, have noticed that I have, in this discussion, translated in one line the hokku I have cited. The truth is that the greatest majority of Japanese haiku writers regard the haiku as a one-line poem. This is a simple statement of fact which, for some unaccountable reason, most American professors do not take seriously, but poets are different. Recognizing the Japanese view, some poets have written some wonderful one-line haiku. Among them are:

the sun lights up a distant ridge another

—John Wills³²

blackbird and nightfall sharing the darkness

—Virginia Brady Young³³

a stick goes over the falls at sunset

—Cor van den Heuvel³⁴

I must add that writing and translating haiku are two different acts. I translate in one line those haiku that are not broken into lines. However, the

32 John Wills, *Reed Shadows* (Burnt Lake Press and Black Moss Press, 1987).

33 *Haiku Moment*.

34 *The Haiku Anthology*.

fact that the majority of Japanese regard the haiku as a one-line poem does not mean that haiku, in English, must be written in one line. I myself write haiku in English in one *and* three lines. It's embarrassing to quote myself, but here are two:

Outside the window a shower of leaves: longing from the past

In your panties
slightly pulled down
a crisp fallen leaf³⁵

I wrote these for the original function of the hokku—to begin renga sequences: the first one to start a sequence with Marlene Wills, a painter and a poet who lives in Tennessee, and the second one to begin a solo sequence. I am tickled to tell you that the second one has been translated into Polish by Czeslaw Milosz.³⁶

As regards the content of the haiku, the biggest question—if only because the standard notion of haiku, both in Japan and in the United States, seems to be that the haiku describes a seasonal change—is whether or not the concept of *kigo*, “seasonal words,” should be adopted in English haiku as well. This question, actually, is most often asked by my compatriots suspiciously looking into haiku written in foreign languages, but in recent years some American haiku practitioners have taken it up seriously. For example, Bill

35 H. Sato, *One Hundred Frogs* (Weatherhill, 1983); also in *That First Time: Renga on Love and Other Poems* (St. Andrews Press, 1988).

36 Czeslaw Milosz, *Haiku*, published in Kraków, 1992, p. 141.

Higginson, an important figure in what Cor van den Heuvel calls the haiku movement in this country, is now pushing the idea in earnest and is even compiling an anthology of haiku indicating the four seasons under contract with a publisher.

I do not necessarily object to this movement or effort, but I think creating what may be called a seasonal paradigm comparable to the one that exists in Japan is going to be difficult—for two reasons. (The reasons, incidentally, do not include the size of the country or climactic variation. Japan is one-twenty-fifth of the United States but is not *that* small; the United States is simply big. Furthermore, Japan's climactic variation is comparable to that experienced in the whole range of the East Coast, from Florida to Maine.)

One difficulty arises from the fact that Japan is culturally uni-centered whereas the United States is multi-centered. Most of Japan's literary and aesthetic notions were formed and elaborated upon in Kyoto and then, beginning in Bashō's time, gradually moved to Tokyo. This cultural uni-centralism has allowed the creation and maintenance of things like the seasonal paradigm. This is not likely to be possible in the United States.

The other difficulty is the different structures of human relationships in Japan and the United States. I do not wholeheartedly subscribe to the vertical versus horizontal, group versus individual, dichotomy in social relations. Still, compared with the American people, the Japanese do tend to form groups and, in each group, create and accept a teacher-student relationship. American haiku writers also form groups or associations but they do so mainly for the casual purpose of getting together with other people or having their pieces published. They do *not* do so to have a pedagogue and allow themselves to be led by that person. Most haiku writers in the United States would be shocked

to learn that the primary task of the head of any haiku society in Japan, called *kessha*, is to revise his or her students' haiku at will, automatically, routinely.