

## Understanding Modern English Language Haiku

-by Tracy Koretsky

*flies explore  
the newly painted sign  
fish market*

—Jane Reichhold, co-editor of [Lynx](#)

*cold night  
the dashboard lights  
of another car*

—John Stevenson, editor of [The Heron's Nest](#)

*snorkeling  
a chasm as deep  
as fear*

—George Swede, editor of [Frogpond](#)

*dune wind—  
the blackened seed pods  
of a bush lupine*

—Linda Papanicolaou, editor of [Haigaonline](#)

*blue sky  
before me  
beyond me*

—Colin Stewart Jones, editor of [Notes from the Gean](#)

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Like it or not, American poetry is factionalized. Academic poets snub gesturing street poets; language poets bar-brawl with new formalists. It's the kind of passionate squabble that, at the very least, proves the vitality of the source from which all these tributaries flow. Yet, with rare exception, haiku, the [most practiced form](#) of literature in the world, is segregated, as if in a lake of its own. Ask an American poet what a haiku is and you are likely to be told that it is a three-line form with 5, 7, and 5 syllables per line, and that it contains a nature image. Neither is true.

This is unsettling given the seminal relationship of haiku to American poetry. In the early twentieth century, a time when American arts of all types were struggling to distinguish themselves from European conventions, there was a concurrent interest in all things Oriental—an interest shared by [Ezra Pound](#), the intellectual center of the first truly American

movement of poets, the [Imagists](#). Through them, haiku—or rather, what Pound and his circle misapprehended to be haiku—came to provide the formal tenets (though not the subject) of modernism.

Half a century later, during America's next significant cultural revolution, poets would once again misapprehend haiku, this time as philosophical fuel for those poets known as the [Beats](#). Pound misunderstood the two parts of a haiku, believing they were meant merely to describe one another rather than to resonate. He even called his experiments with the form "equations". As for the Beats, they thought their subject entirely Zen, which, in reality, is a small subset of haiku. Now, not all misunderstandings—especially among poets—are bad. Something new and fresh arose from these accidents, something still easily evident in American poetry today.

Just to parse haiku and understand its mechanisms can provide keys to reading American poetry with greater sophistication, which in turn matures our craft. Through haiku, a poet can begin to comprehend contemporary poetry's disjunctivity—its leaps in logic and argument, and the space it must leave for the reader's participation. In terms of craft, it can help teach where to cut lines and how to work across stanzas.

But beware, despite its brevity and seeming transparency of diction, there is nothing simple about haiku. It is a deep and highly nuanced genre with sensibilities that can take years to comprehend. That is why this primer attempts to introduce only how to read haiku—not necessarily to write it.

To begin, then, let us turn to some of the genre's best magazines. In 2004 I conducted a poll of [22 such publications](#), discovering that none of them—that's right, none—sought poems with lines of 5/7/5 syllables. To oversimplify, Japanese and English sound units are not easily comparable. As a result, it is rare to find a poem as long as seventeen syllables in today's English-language haiku, and the way those syllables are arrayed varies widely.

As you go through the demonstrations our kind guests have donated, take note of the syllables and the way they are distributed across the lines.

How to do so most effectively will be the topic addressed by our first guest, [Jane Reichhold](#), a renowned teacher of haiku. In addition to these superbly lucid [primer pages](#) from her excellent book *[Writing and Enjoying Haiku: A Hands-on Guide](#)*, Reichhold provides a free peer-critique website for the benefit of the world community of English-language haiku writers: the popular and lively [AHA Poetry Forum](#).

Yet, have a look at [Lynx](#), the magazine Ms. Reichhold edits with her husband Werner, and you might not see any stand-alone three-line poems. What's going on? Well, there is a whole universe of material that shares the essential qualities one finds in haiku; material not far, in some aspects, from Western poetry, but possessing a somewhat different logic. There is inspiration to be found there, but you have to know how to interpret these poems first.

To help us do so, Ms. Reichhold begins:

"Haiku is a genre of form poetry meaning that the form has a definite form. Though we non-Japanese do not count syllables, I do strongly believe that we should maintain the shape of haiku with short, long, short lines. Take:

*fish market*  
*the flies explore*  
*the newly painted sign*

and notice what happens by simply rearranging the lines:

*flies explore*  
*the newly painted sign*  
*fish market*

First of all, we eliminate an article (the)—always a plus when trying to be succinct. Secondly, all haiku writers search for interesting first lines that grab the reader's interest. 'Flies explore' opens up an activity—stronger than if on a place—'fish market'. Thirdly, since this haiku uses the riddle technique, the author should set up the riddle with the first two lines, then give the 'answer' in the third. As the haiku is originally expressed, the 'answer' is given away in the first line.

I created this poem for this demonstration, but often the original version is the way the author experienced the poem: being in a fish market, then noticing more flies are crawling on the sign than on the fish. In the revision the poem is expressing a situation: "flies are crawling on a sign—why?" The answer comes in the end "because this is a fish market!" —the AHA moment of the poem."

That "aha" moment one hears so much about in haiku circles basically has to do with allowing the reader to make the connection for him- or herself. Haiku demands an active reader.

In fact, our second guest, [John Stevenson](#), editor of the venerable publication [The Heron's Nest](#), ties this to the form's origins: "Haiku itself comes from an earlier form of poetry known as renku—a collaboration in which two or more poets contribute verses."

So you see, haiku began as something of a game—or at least a participatory improvisation requiring the total involvement of the poets. But like games or musical improvisations, there are some rules, and one is that the opening verse, from which the form we know as haiku derives, contain a seasonal reference.

Note that this is slightly different from the common Western understanding that haiku is about nature. A seasonal reference is not only about nature, but about nature within time.

Mr. Stevenson expands on this: "The reference can be a single word or a phrase. Some of the most frequently used are snow, cherry blossoms, and fireflies, denoting winter, spring, and summer respectively." Take some time with some issues of [The Heron's Nest](#) for a sense of how haiku poets make seasonal references. While there, notice how they operate with the rest

of the poem.

To show how such references function expressively, Mr. Stevenson offers us this:

*overnight travel  
the dashboard lights  
of another car*

"This may have evoked a haiku mood for some readers, but the application of a traditional seasonal reference can offer powerful associations. Since one has so few words to work with in a haiku, it's important that each carry its weight. Why not avail myself of the additional resonance of a late autumn seasonal reference suggesting the imminence of winter—especially when it expresses part of what I am feeling:

*cold night  
the dashboard lights  
of another car*

Since I have said no more in the poem itself, I will say no more now about the particular associations this adds to the poem. But perhaps you will agree that an additional element has been introduced and that it broadens the implications of the poem. Not to be overlooked are the implications of the fact that I have identified with other poets through the act of using a traditional season reference."

This sense of referring to, and thereby resonating with, centuries of poets who have used the same or similar seasonal references is often cherished by people who love the form. It is the principal way to access emotion in these poems.

The concept of resonance is perhaps the most difficult for Western readers to understand. We tend to make Ezra Pound's error and read the second part of a haiku as an expansion upon the first, as if there were a colon between the two parts. Rather, the intention of the combination is to create a sort of chord—the relationship may be subtle or oblique or witty or stark or joyous; the relationship is literally the crux of the form. To read haiku means to make the connection.

People who write haiku in English generally use the term "juxtaposition" to describe this, and it is never easy. "A successful juxtaposition of two seemingly unrelated things leads readers to a moment of awe and wonder; an unsuccessful one leaves readers disinterested, even irked," says our next guest, [George Swede](#), editor of [Frogpond](#), the journal of the [Haiku Society of America](#).

"Across the centuries, writers have over-used some pairings, so that rather than being unexpected, they have become familiar: blossoms/spring, rose/woman, rain/tears, night/monsters, and so on. Any poet who employs such established associations must find a fresh way or risk boring the audience. To avoid this, the poet can always opt to unite two things no one has yet considered as possibly belonging together. But, an unusual combination

risks that readers will find the pairing incompatible."

Mr. Swede shows us how he struggled to make choices in this poem, the final version of which is forthcoming in the haiku magazine, [Acorn](#):

*snorkeling  
a chasm as deep  
as a massage table*

"The two main elements were the deep chasm and the massage table; snorkeling provided the context or linking mechanism. My reasoning was that snorkeling involves the same posture as getting a massage—lying prone. The reader was supposed to connect the chasm in the ocean floor with the idea that a massage table can also lead to deep experiences, sometimes painful or exhilarating.

Looking at the poem again, I found the connection too far-fetched. I had to find something more meaningful than a massage table:

*snorkeling  
a chasm as deep  
as feeling*

This change didn't work either, but for a different reason: 'feeling' was too vague. So, I recalled what emotion dominated my adventure snorkeling:

*snorkeling  
a chasm as deep  
as fear*

At last the two chief parts were linked in a way that made sense, but the poem no longer possessed what I had originally sought: two entities never before juxtaposed. Instead, I had brought together two oft-associated things, chasm and fear. I can only hope that readers will find snorkeling to be a context novel enough for them to experience the haiku as unique."

Notice in each of these examples how the third line operates. In Jane Reichhold's poem, it answers a riddle, in John Stevenson's, it subverts our expectation—the intimate light does not originate in the poet's own car. As for George Swede's, we expect something tangible, concrete; what we get is anything but. Appreciating these small surprises yields much of the delight of the genre.

Why "genre" and not "form?" Sample the online contents of [Frogpond](#), the publication Mr. Swede edits, and you will discover other types of work within the haiku family. To learn what these poems are and how to read them, Mr. Swede suggests the [definitions](#) of the Haiku Society of America, the parent organization of his publication.

What they have in common is that a resonant juxtaposition is relevant in all of them. This is the quality shared by the daring work on the pages of [Lynx](#). It is true also of haiga, the

exciting visual collage form, in which a haiku is paired with an image.

"There is an openness in the relationship—a 'link/shift' relationship to each other," says [Haigaonline](#) editor, Linda Papanicolaou. "Images are not coupled with captions or explanations that tell us what we're seeing in the photo. The haiku may, in fact, be about what's in the image, but amplify or complement it, say, with sound, smell, or other imagery beyond the pictorial. Or, it may be about something else completely, linking to the image through comparison, mood, etc. A good haiga suggests rather than tells; this allows the reader to enter the work as aesthetic experience."

To see what she means, click through an [issue](#) of Haigaonline. You will find there everything from ink brush painting, simplified in style, with a haiku written in calligraphy on an empty section of the paper, to Western-style drawing and painting, collage, digital imaging, photography, etc. Doing this may be the fastest way to comprehend the range of sensibilities current in contemporary English-language haiku poetry.

Ms. Papanicolaou, for example, studies and often tries to emulate traditional haiku. She demonstrates:

"I wanted to write a type of haiku called 'shasei'—a sketch. It was early October, I was in some dunes in California, and the wildflowers were past their peak. I jotted:

*blackened seed pods of lupine*

on my pad.

Often in traditional haiku, the first line is a season word fragment, but mine already had its season—blackened, dry seedpods occur in late autumn. I felt they brought to the poem the Japanese aesthetic of impermanence and loss. So what I still needed was an image that established setting, or complemented and deepened the phrase:

*dune wind*

evokes harshness and brings in sound as well as the tactile sting of blowing sand.

*blackened seed pods  
of a lupine*

needed something—more specificity, perhaps—so that the phrase didn't just end with a third line that just completed line two without bringing something of its own. The original plant was what's called 'beach lupine', a small, blue-flowering mounding plant. But a taller, more robust yellow-flowered lupine called "bush lupine" is also native.

*dune wind—  
the blackened seed pods  
of a bush lupine*

I liked the sound; plus, 'beach' lupine with 'dune' was redundant—closed. The larger, showier species, with its sense of resilience, seemed the right way to end the poem."

Toward the other end of the spectrum of haiku sensibility is [Colin Stewart Jones](#), editor of [Notes from the Gean](#), who uses his "sketch" to somewhat different ends:

"To choose to record an event in haiku form is a subjective act and one has, therefore, given the event meaning. So I tend to record my initial reaction to a set of circumstances and then work on the composition later. I use the word 'compose' deliberately. For example, I remember first taking a note of the scene:

*the expanse of summer sky ahead of and behind me*

I then started thinking about how the sky was also above me, so I jotted down:

*over my head*

This started me thinking about how the sky was beyond my understanding, which led me to other philosophical questions and my emotional responses to them. I felt like I was young again, looking up at the sky in wonderment for the first time. This would become the essence of the haiku I would try to write.

Often, when I try to write my thoughts as a haiku, it just doesn't work. I had:

*summer sky—  
the expanse of blue  
ahead of me*

*summer sky—  
the expanse of blue  
all around me*

I thought of synonyms for 'ahead' and 'behind,' and came up with 'before' and 'beyond.' These would better suit the philosophical questions I had posed as they had more depth of meaning. To finish the haiku, I simply pruned and arranged these elements:

*summer sky  
expanse of blue  
before me  
beyond me*

I wanted not just to set a scene, but to pose an existential question then supply an answer of sorts. Thus I arrived at my arrangement.

I decided to drop the obvious seasonal reference 'summer sky' for 'blue sky' which I felt was more universal yet still gave a strong sense of summer. I deliberately chose no punctuation so the poem could be read in multiple ways.

*blue sky*  
*before me*  
*beyond me*

The consonance of the B sounds was serendipitous but, with the monorhyme of 'me' on the end of lines 2 and 3, added a dimension to the poem, highlighting man's eternal search for understanding."

Mr. Jones explains the somewhat cryptic name of his publication this way: "A Gean tree is a wild cherry which, though not as showy as the formal Japanese variety, is nevertheless still rooted in the same ground and will produce fruit." In *Notes from the Gean*, readers will encounter one-line poems, and poems on subjects not usually associated with haiku. "There are many poets whose work I admire," says Jones, "but I still feel the haiku community could do with some radical new writers."

His publication features them from every place in the world where English is spoken, and sometimes where it's not; its masthead reflects this. "I first 'met' the original editors of *Notes from the Gean* on an Internet discussion forum," he said—a forum very much like the spirited [community](#) Ms. Reichhold hosts. "There," he continued, "as I developed as a writer and started to submit my poems for publication, I began to encounter the work of, and form relationships and even friendships with, other poets."

Which is what I, along with all the hard-working editors who generously donated their time to this piece, would like to invite you to do. It's a great way to begin a practice that will allow you to be highly creative with words and images for free every single day if you like. Listen well and patiently, and you will strengthen your ability to read and write poetry—both Eastern and Western—that surprises and delights.