

HAIKU (#HAHAIKU)

Part 1: Origin Story

My first encounter with haiku was through Vincent O’Sullivan’s play *Shuriken*, produced in 1984 in Wellington, New Zealand—where I was a struggling law student doing English Lit to fill up some electives—and directed by my inspirational drama prof and first creative writing teacher, Phil Mann. *Shuriken* was about an infamous World War II camp that held 800 Japanese prisoners of war near the provincial NZ town of Featherstone. Infamous because of an “incident” in 1942 where 49 prisoners and one Kiwi guard were killed. The play explores whether the Japanese were following their military field code: *never surrender to the enemy under any circumstances*. Was this mass suicide by machinegun or a trigger-happy local? How much did cultural confusion play a part, seeing as neither side spoke much of the other’s language?

*Summer grasses
all that remains
of soldiers’ dreams*

—Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694)

Truth is no one knows. The soldiers on both sides, like the grass they all now lie under, weren't talking. What was clear to me from the Bashō haiku included in the play was the power of this minimal form, and that there was some 5-7-5 syllable rule. I like rules, though I was also into punk rock and loved breaking them. But the translated haiku above doesn't follow the 5-7-5 syllable rule. Why not? Well, the old school Japanese haiku masters used 5-7-5 *on*, or sound units, and these are shorter than the English idea of a syllable, which means purists feel English haiku go on too long. Another rule is that haiku contain a *kigo*: a reference to the seasons or to nature.

*They escaped with their lives
Managed to get married
They can, at last, change their clothes*

—Buson (1716–1783)

Surprise! No seasons, no nature, a plethora of syllables, and an epic narrative compressed into sixteen words. Perhaps they're starting a new season in their lives? No, this would raise the heckles of the Haiku Police. They would deem this not a haiku, but a *senryū*, referring to human nature, not nature.

*For sale
Baby shoes
Never worn.*

—Hemingway (often gets the credit,
but it's probably not his)

This famous very short story might also fit the *senryū* bill, but if you research haiku, you'll find that for all the rules there are just as many rulebreakers, controversies, and contradictions. The Grandmaster Flashes of Haiku all had their own takes, moved the goalposts, and expanded the form. Here are some definitions of the ever-evolving haiku form (rules that I break all the time), in freestylin' haiku form, and with a complete disregard for those pesky syllables:

*They are three lines but / were originally three pieces
in one long line / let's honour that here
There's a "cutting word" / hireji—where things change
/ but it's untranslatable / (see also caesura)
They don't have punctuation / titles, rhymes, or
puns / story + haiku = haibun (four on or morae in*

Japanese (ha-i-bu-n)

*They're Zen / but they can't be Zen / that's asking
too much of them*

*Themes include the transience of life / feelings of
love and loss / cherry blossoms*

*They're not really a poem / more just an impression /
a sketch—WHAM!*

*They can congratulate, praise, describe, express
gratitude / wit, cleverness, disappointment,
resentment, or whatever you want / but rarely carry
enlightenment*

*They are simply what is / happening in this place /
at this moment*

*A moment of awareness / in which human nature is /
related to nature*

*There's a clash of two images / find meaning in the
middle / flip them, pancake trampoline!*

*They can work like jokes / set up—build—punchline /
BaDoomCha! High Hat! MIC DROP!*

*They can be riddles / Black cats that hate rabbit bits /
That's Bad Luck*

*They're a way of life / more than a poem per se / not
literature / you must live in the moment / this is a
tanka (5-7-5-7-7)*

Haiku started out as short poetry by and for the common people. Haiku can be mundane or gross, but some of the greats will shake you.

*My melons that you / Stole last year . . . this year I
place / Upon your grave, my son*

—Oemaru

*Death Song: If they ask for me / Say: He had some
business / In another world*

—Sokan

*It pierces my heel / As I walk in the bedroom / My
late wife's comb*

—Buson

*Congratulations / Issa! You have survived to feed /
this year's mosquitoes*

—Issa

Yes, I like to translate famous lines from revered authors into haiku, and I'm into jokes #hahaiku:

*"Haiku for The Recession":
Tea stained fingers / Two cups squeezed from one
bag / I am my mother*

The haiku as joke is pervasive in popular culture. I particularly like the cartoon of the new haiku *haiku* mini-van, with seating rows of 5-7-5, and also the grotesque guffaws you get in Ryan Mecum's book of *Zombie Haiku*:

*Blood is really warm / it's like drinking hot
chocolate / but with more screaming*

A-list auteur film directors have also dabbled in #hahaiku. Here's Wes Anderson's opening and closing satiric haiku for his stop-motion animated feature *Isle of Dogs*:

*I turn my back / On human kind / Frost on window
pane
Whatever happened / To man's best friend / Falling
spring blossom.*

Taika Waititi in *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* has his hero, Ricky Baker, composing haiku while on the run:

*Kingi, you wanker / You asshole, I hate you heaps /
Please die soon, in pain.
Trees. Birds. Rivers. Sky. / Running with my Uncle
Hec / Living forever.*

The latter follows the nature rule. The former celebrates the profane, which is what the original common form did until Bashō raised it to high art. The *haiku* was given its name by the Japanese writer Masaoka Shiki at the end of the 19th century as an adaptation of *hokku*, the opening stanza of a longer *renga*. I like that many of the great unwashed, and unversed, still feel they can have a crack at a haiku and write one that cracks people up (think limericks). On that, even the great Bashō wrote a scatological haiku featuring bean paste. That said, a joke is a cherry blossom, blooms briefly and is gone, whereas Bashō's summer grass haiku haunts me to this day. Line 1: he sucks us in to loll about in *summer grasses*. Line 2 foreshadows something dark, *all that remains*. Line 3: *of soldier's dreams*.

You have to flip back to line 1 to find the summer grass you enjoyed was fertilized by soldier compost. It leaves me feeling dirty/guilty, and reminiscing about those gardens of stone I visited for dead Kiwi soldiers in Belgium, and all the Americans in Arlington cemetery, with its C.T. section for Coloured Troops. It reminds us of how summer grass grows all over our war-torn world.

Part 2: My Life

Disclaimer: I don't expect to win any awards for my haiku, but I would like to at this point thank my children for making them an enduring part of my life. After my 1984 exposure to Bashō, I didn't really think about haiku until 2007, when my first son was born. We had another son eighteen months later. Neither slept well, so neither did we. I became a "Dawn of the Dad" zombie who couldn't concentrate to write anything of substance.

*How come you've never written a novel? / Because
short stories / are all I can write while / the children
are eating*

— Raymond Carver

Sleep-deprived and brain-fried, I was constantly walking the kids in strollers to try to get them to go to sleep—not writing the great New Zealand novel, or play, or film, or even a mediocre short story slice-of-life to self-publish on the back of a box of diapers. I came up with a challenge, something small and manageable, to help my creative side stay alive: *I must write / a haiku every day / post it on Twitter.*

I'd write them with the kids and use their unique POVs. And there must be no judgement, no questions about how good, bad, or ugly they were; publish and be damned!

*I can't explain / this spark between us / static on the
slide
Da da Dada dad / Dad Da da Dad Dada Dad / Dad!
Dad! Dad! Dad! Dad!
What is sadder / than the boy who waves / at empty
trains?
Kids slow you right down / I see your shadow, Dad,
see / all the little things
Sadder than the boy / who waves at empty trains is /
his Dad waving, too*

*It's not a bean / it's a long pea. Lies / I have told
 children
 It is not all there! / What happened to the moon? /
 It's taking a bath
 Just because I'm big / doesn't mean I don't have
 feelings / I have big feelings
 For boats to stop / they throw out / their anger
 Forget the Xbox / All a boy needs is a bug / and a
 stick and time
 "Haiku 4 Micro-managing Dad": Scratching graffiti /
 off a picnic table with / my car keys—"F*ck U"
 Hey worm on the path / we rescued for our garden /
 You work for us now!
 "Parent Paradox Haiku": I am not whining / when I
 complain bitterly / about kids whining
 "Haiku 4 Philip Larkin": Kids, they fu up / Don't
 mean to but with all the / crumbs & poo, they do
 I had to explain / It's not a big coffee machine /
 Tahi's first steam train
 We cut Sampson's hair / He chewed the ears off a
 horse / Delilah beware
 Maybe you'd like to write / plays when you're older? /
 No, I will be grown up.*

I'd "publish" these on Twitter and Facebook and the *likes* told me what people connected with. People began to send me haiku they found or composed themselves. Then I got a gig. A friend asked me to "perform" haiku with musical accompaniment at a fundraiser for our Paekakariki playcentre. It was . . . "experimental." The highlight being when I gave the crowd first lines and they wrote the rest, then I read them out. It was just like the old school Japanese Renga Parties, where the Master Poet leads with an opening *hokku* (minus the Master).

Twist. My wife got a job back in Canada. We were moving, with two small kids, and I was going to be primary caregiver in North Vancouver, where I knew no one. There would be a lot of opportunities to write more haiku. They would grow up there and I'd get new material:

*Brush the thigh / Fingers to the sky, let it fly! /
 Ba-ba-ba-baseball!
 Look at my shadow / Can your shadow catch the
 ball? / Yeah, a shadow ball
 Haiku 4 Hardass Little League Coach: Bloody nose,
 stitches / it is all good, boys, because / the girls, they
 love scars.*

Twist. In 2012, I got an invite to *The Big Show!* To talk to RNZ–Radio New Zealand with the famous broadcaster/ex-politician/ex-Race Relations Conciliator and All Blacks rugby legend, Chris Laidlaw. He wanted my take on being a Kiwi in Canada, to compare race relations between the two countries, and to talk about haiku. He’d heard I was some sort of expert. \$#*! me! I had to start taking this haiku thing way more seriously. I finally consulted the great Elder . . . Wikipedia (an excellent entry that covers the Grand Masters, the rules, and breaking them). For the interview, I wrote something new:

*I can't save the moth / flopping in the toilet bowl /
but will piss outside*

Truth is, I wrote *pee* not *piss* for the RNZ family audience, and because my mother was listening. But *piss* sounds better, right? #onomatopoeia. Chris Laidlaw liked “the moth one.” I like how it’s a drama and a dilemma. It’s about nature/an insect, and death, how sometimes we can’t save the fragile things in life, and if we try we might crush their wings and get stinky fingers. But maybe I could have rescued that moth some other way, and it crawled up onto some paper bridge I’d made? And not left it for the next person to have the same dilemma of Save vs Flush? I still wonder what happened to that moth. Still marvel at my cowardice. And what if I am that moth, floundering in that bowl? Too deep? Too much to load onto a fragile haiku? Maybe. Whatevs, I like how insects feature in haiku and how Bashō ensured that humble creatures could be heroes. It’s a world where we have equal rights.

*How lonely I felt / On a cold, cold night / When I
killed that spider*

– Shiki

*The old pond
A frog jumped in
Kerplunk!*

– Bashō, translated by
Allen Ginsberg

You can’t discuss haiku without including the above “Bohemian Rhapsody” of the form, often acclaimed as the most famous haiku, and translated by many. Ginsberg

captures the sound, the shock, plus there's a fun bit of Kermit in "Kerplunk!" Others translate "old" as "quiet" or "ancient," but I like "old." I feel like the old pond and wish a frog would jump into me and set off some ripples. Plus, the third line reminds me of Buddhist *koan*, where your mind jumps like a frog, not knowing where it might land. Or am I reading too much into it? If I try to explain it, intellectualize it, do I dissect the frog, cutting off its legs so it can never jump again? Bashō doesn't explain it, so why should we? Can't we just be alive in that moment, and then enjoy the ripples? There are more rules, as many ways to break them, and far greater poetic minds have written on this. Check out: Tom Lowenstein's *Classic Haiku* and *Haiku Inspirations*, the Peter Pauper Press haiku series, and *The Haiku Anthology*, edited by Cor Van Den Heuvel. I've "borrowed" a little from these works here. Forgive me, I have a crow spirit.

*After I'm dead, tell people / I was a persimmon eater
/ Who also loved haiku*

— Issa

David Geary #hahaiku can be found on Twitter @gearsgeary.

The RNZ Chris Laidlaw interview, "Writer David Geary on life in Canada, and writing haiku," can be listened to at: www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/sunday/audio/2508286/david-geary.