

THE SWORD-CUT HAIKU BOOK

Chuck Wilcox

**“Once there was a weaver ...”
The ko-danshi’s* fan becomes
The shuttle of a loom.
- Chuck Wilcox**

*Note: The traditional Japanese storyteller

This book is nine pages - a Sword-Cut about Haiku. Much more information is available just about everywhere depending on your interest.

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Haiku Information

I am a writer of Haiku, and the reason I do it is because it is so satisfying to lay out a simple observation of something, usually from nature but it can be of anything and find other levels of meaning in it.

Haiku:

hai-ku *noun*

1. a Japanese poem of seventeen syllables, in three lines of five, seven, and five, traditionally evoking images of the natural world.
2. an English imitation of this.

What's not in the definition is that the observation is about something seen, and then the poet must find the "leap" that connects the observation to something larger. I find sometimes I'm able to do that leap with ease, and sometimes I have to force it. It's good to keep forcing it because it is useful exercise, and sometimes it turns out very well.

*Rebellious pigeons
flying up a one-way street
defy the arrow.*

When I get through reading a haiku from a different writer, if the writer has done a good job I realize there are several meanings, and I go back and read it again, and again, because the metaphor is complex and offers different interpretations or meanings. This "leaping" is both freeing and restrictive because in that short space the author has to be able to put together a sequence of words that builds a rich, multi-layered metaphor.

Experiments with line length, word arrangement, and brevity by many people have led to the realization that modern haiku comes in many flavors. The 5,7,5 structure was not reflective of Japanese haiku at all. Japanese Kanji are written in a column from the top to the bottom of the page.

A haiku doesn't need a title, rhymes, or other trim, and uses a few words economically to convey the metaphor. The word metaphor is even a misnomer. It might say the boy runs like a deer. The Haiku poet would suggest that the boy IS the deer. In debate this is called an *enthymeme*.

One of my favorites from these experiments was a poem called "Tundra" (Cor Van den Heuvel) which was that single word in the middle of a white page.

I call my poetry "sword-cut poetry" because the leap is very much like the moment of a sword cut. In my practice of *lai-do* (the Japanese way of sword

drawing) we memorize different forms and positions to be applied in different situations. In all cases however the sword moves out of the scabbard slowly until the moment of the cut. When the cut comes there is a whistle from the air passing rapidly over the blade. If I do the form of the cut successfully I have succeeded. A second cut should not be necessary in a real sword exchange.

How I began to write Haiku

In 1983 a stroke left my right (dominant) hand and leg partially incapacitated, and for several months I couldn't keep extended metaphors in my brain. But I was able to keep a haiku. I took to carrying a little notebook with me, where I would jot down the shape of the incident, or thought, and then come back to it later. This was difficult because my left hand's writing was atrocious.

My wife, Lola, purchased a high-end IBM computer, and her co-worker gave me a pirated WordStar software program. In 1984 high-end meant 64K. I started using the software to write and record the haiku. I liked working on the computer because I could work one-handed, and I could edit on the spot. I would scrawl a haiku while out, and when I came home immediately transfer it to the computer while it was hot in my memory.

Learning about Haiku

I went through many different experiments of what a haiku should look like, e.g. number of syllables, line length, etc.

It seemed obvious to me that I should write 1000 haiku to see what I could learn about the form. One day while waiting for the bus I wrote a haiku. I decided that once a day, when I was sitting somewhere, I would make an observation, and write a haiku. I achieved 1000 poems and because of this I invented the term "Bus Bench Haiku".

Rock and river
slow down a bit
and let me see you
rushing past. –sasoku* (published)

*note- sasoku. My *nome de plume* in the early days. It means (Left-Hand) in Japanese. I was able to practicing Kendo one-handed for several years after stroke rehabilitation.

I also read haiku written by others, both ancient and modern writers.

Frog Pond is a haiku journal, and its title means something special to haiku writers. The Japanese poet Basho wrote a poem hundreds of years ago.

*Old pond
Frog jumps in
Sound of water. --Matsuo Basho (multiple translators)*

This has been variously translated and is an inspiration to haiku writers to encourage them to expand what they are doing. There are books of Basho's poetry available, and of many other poets, from both ancient and modern Japan as well as many other cultures.

There are books of haiku that have been selected by someone given some criteria. The de-selection work has already been done by the editor, and the quality of the haiku in the book is excellent.

My favorite haiku is from another ancient Japanese writer.

*The roof of my hut burned.
Now I can see
The moon. -- Issa (multiple translators)*

I love Issa's poetry.

Publishing Haiku

I decided to see if I could publish my poems in a haiku publication. I subscribed to several haiku magazines. At the beginning I received in the mail a number of haiku publications by serious but amateur writers. Some of them were published from a typewriter or computer on 8 ½ by 11 folded in half to make a booklet. I read them, and I submitted, and I learned. I tried to select haiku that fit with the style they were publishing, and I was able to publish a few poems in Haiku Journals. I like this one the best of these.

*Buddha sits quietly
museum visitors too
will pass. --Chuck Wilcox*

What I found is that anybody can publish poetry, but no one makes any money at it. The most prestigious haiku journals were not responsive to my haiku, and there was no real feedback as to why. I did get some comments from other

publishers, and it gave me insight that I needed to write a lot more than a 1000 haiku.

Eventually I stopped taking these magazines, and I stopped trying to publish. Not too long ago I realized I missed reading the haikus, and subscribed to my favorite journals. At this point I read haiku in between working on pieces of a project, for example between songs on the musical instruments I play (on one-handed flutes). I keep my eye out for recently published collections, perhaps selected around a particular idea.

My Recipe for Beginner Haiku

There is not one completely successful methodology. Young people in school are encouraged to count syllables and lines, and to use end rhymes. These work because they are a good way to learn the discipline of the form. After a time you have some background for what you are trying to accomplish. It's like any craft – peach canning or beer brewing or candy making... at the beginning you stick to the recipe, you find what works for you, and then later you begin experimenting. Getting to what works for you is a long process that begins with assuming you know nothing. Be willing to put in the work on the basic forms.

1. **Simply observe.** Wherever you are, observe what interests you. Look at it.
2. **Write down your observation**, possibly including other senses (hear, smell, taste).
3. **Writing the Leap** involves what that cumulative image reminds you of, or is like, or leads into. This leap can be profound or it can be a simple comparison or anything in between.
4. **No rewriting** at this point. If you had another thought while writing, just write another haiku.
5. **Shut off the critic**, whether in you or someone else. Criticism gets in the way of free writing; it shuts down spontaneity. "There'll be time enough for countin' when the dealin's done."
6. **Experiment.** Bus Stop Haiku was an experiment to see what would happen if while waiting for a bus I could observe some one thing and write a haiku about it. You could choose a repetitive moment that lends itself to

observation and writing. When you are in the invention phase experimenting with this or that way of working is encouraged.

Extra Seasonings

Traditional haiku have a seasonal reference, or a specific word, that places the poem in a particular part of the calendar.

Just a hint
of black umbrella--
evening snow. --Chuck Wilcox

When you begin thinking about this particular element usually seasonal references just begin bubbling up.

There's an idea out there that the first and third lines of a haiku should rhyme. That is not from the Japanese root – the poem there is written in a straight line down the page without line breaks. Which doesn't mean you can't rhyme – sometimes that feels very good.

Note: Even the English 5,7,5 structure is not obviated here.

Occasional Haiku

Now I don't worry about publishing – I just write.

One thing that is extremely enjoyable to me is Occasional Haiku. I write a haiku for a celebration (wedding, birthday, anniversary, even a memorial service). It is often very personal. I usually do not make a copy of it. I just give it away. Often I never see it again. It's very satisfying.

Hurry, hurry!
Now relax, relax!
There are no more tombs to see.

...and twenty-one
also rhymes with
none

this dragon

has forgotten
in its claw
it holds
a golden ball

Finding a Haiku Community

It can be useful and fun to know other people experimenting with Haiku. One way is to begin to publish in the many small journals, notice whose haiku resonate with you, and contact them on social media. Locally there are often groups that meet from time to time to write haiku together.

Here are some other possibilities:

Write a Haiku as if you are on a journey of some kind. (ex. The poet walking the length of Japan) then write a prose section about what you are seeing or doing and then the Haiku. Each Haiku could stand alone but it also might mean something special about the writing. "Journey to the Deep North" by Basho is the most revered writing of this form.

Or -

Invite several writers to sit in a Haiku Circle. The first person writes a Haiku. The second person takes a word from the first one's poem and writes a new haiku; and so on around the circle. This could be performed on Zoom for example. Or it can all be copied and shared on Facebook. Or some other style or variation you may invent.

NOW - YOU WRITE A HAIKU.....

Part 2: Sword-Cut Poetry

The following are examples of categories that have been mentioned in the above text. They are culled from my files and (in my opinion) represent a selection of my Sword-Cut Haiku that may be worth reading.

Sword so sharp
to prove the edge it was not drawn
Distant summer thunder

This is me
in front of Mt. Fuji
And here I am
with the Buddha

“Thy beauty is past compare”
he said to his mate--
the spotted frog

Fancy epaulets
stir marching soldiers hearts
pigeon droppings

Sword
more shiny than the day
it was forged

Mischievous Mozart
And Sumptuous Shubert
Sound alike as cell-phone music

Buddha sits quietly
Museum visitors too
will pass (published)

...and the winner of
the spitting contest...
summer rain

newly sharpened sword
tested on a bundle
of words

Rain, river and rock
Slow down a bit
And let me see you
Rushing past (published)

slow first fly
tenses for the blow
which does not fall

gray fog everywhere--
only now and then
a glimpse of traveler

Experiments with non-usual forms

ragged
chirp
from
last
summer's
lonely
cricket
autumn
deepens

Slurpy
r
Burpy

Boggle

Gritch

Toggle

Frumpy

Grrutchhh!

From My Editor Rejected Collection:

Startled pigeon
left behind
his shadow

To die by drowning
in a flood
of petals.

Dust covers everything -
The steps, the food,
The afternoon.

Her glass encased smile
gathers dust
in late afternoon sun

BRRR.... It's cold
Everything is frozen:
Even my words hang heavy.

Crickets cry
so sadly - they must know
I'm alone.

Scattered by my feet—
Part of the sky.
Stepping in rain puddles.

When I draw the bow
Across the strings
My great-great-grandfather
dances