

## E-WORKSHOP – KEN JONES DOCUMENT

### *Joy and grief – one brush*

#### HAIKU

##### Ken Jones

Those in line  
watching the wind  
sweep the earth

Thus Saito Sanki, on the hunger years of post-war Japan – or anytime, any place in the terrible twentieth century. You can see that not only is a haiku such a little thing – hardly the length of a breath – but it is a half-said thing. At its most effective this tiny coiled spring can release a subtle, fleeting, liberating release from the ache of wanting-it-otherwise.

Much quiet delight and gentle healing awaits the explorer of the haiku world. Haiku have traditionally been the most popular and accessible of literary forms (millions write them in Japan). But you do need to have the *haiku knack*.

#### Some Guidelines

# Don't search after haiku. Instead, cultivate alertness so you are inspired by authentic experience when it arises. The clarity of such a "haiku moment" should be infused with some a warmth of feeling, a shared humanity, as with Osai Ozaki:

Tongs  
a mismatched pair  
one whole winter

# Just relax and keep it simple, without any straining after effect. Avoid cliché, cleverness and wordiness. Thus, Basho:

Water jar cracks --  
I lie awake  
this icy night

# SHOW -- don't TELL. Try to express your experiences through the images that you use, rather than actually saying that you are "sad" or "lonely". This gives space for readers to experience such feelings in their own way, as in this by the eighteenth century master, Buson:

The ends of the warriors' bows  
as they go, brushing  
the dew

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# Similarly, avoid explanations, abstractions and philosophising. Prefer allusion and understatement. Tread lightly.

# Many of the best haiku present unexpected and *contrasting* images. These can arouse profound and subtle emotions and can convey layers of subtle meaning. The Western convention is to write haiku in three lines, but four- and two-liners are acceptable where that makes the best “fit”. Often the first line sets the scene, within which the second line makes an observation. The third line then presents an image contrasting with the second line, throwing our normal expectations out of gear, as it were, and opening up a wider perspective which may be both allusive and elusive. There is a mysterious spark of a wider truth here, which is left to the reader’s awareness (an “open metaphor”). The first example below is from Cicely Hill and the second by Ogino Yoko. The inkstone one, by Mitsui Suzuki, is more complex, recalling William Blake’s “love and grief are woven fine, a clothing for the soul divine.”

Pausing to watch  
breeze over the hayfields  
forgotten names

Hot bath water  
cold on the breastless side  
spring thunder

Inkstone cold  
joy and grief  
one brush

# Finally, are there words which you could omit which would make the haiku work better? And what happens if you change the lines around?

### Haiku and Not Haiku ?

The authority of the above advice rests solely on its helpfulness in enabling us to develop the full potential of the haiku form. But within this mainstream haiku tradition there are, of course, many variations and controversies. For me, the Way of Haiku is part of my Zen Buddhist practice:

For company  
an empty chair

Pushing my reflection  
this wheelbarrow  
full of rain

Most Westerners write in free form. That is to say, they do not stick to three lines of five, seven and five syllables each, though every haiku needs to have some music to it. However, there is general agreement about keeping the haiku short (“one breath”), and 17 syllables is commonly regarded as the maximum. Again, Westerners are generally little concerned with “season words”, which play an important part in conventional Japanese haiku.

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There are also less orthodox haiku, like these by Jim Norton and Nagata Koi respectively:

With melting hearts  
two skeletons  
vow to meet again

How lonely it is  
cultivating the stone leeks  
in this world of dreams

And there is a haiku variant called senryu. These deal humorously with human foibles and follies. Here is a traditional Japanese senryu and, on the right, for comparison, a haiku by Issa:

She suckles her baby  
“On the shelf  
you’ll find some sardines”

Those two tired dolls  
in the corner there – ah yes,  
they are man and wife

“Spam” (or “spoof”) haiku is the name sometimes given to those entertaining little three-liners which constitute the bulk of what popularly pass for “haiku”. In fact they have only a superficial resemblance to the poems discussed here. At the other extreme are the “pseudo haiku” commonly found in mainstream poetry magazines. These are in fact conventional three line poems which may appear flowery, exaggerated and self-absorbed when compared with the authentic product.

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### Now try your hand...

Here is a mixed bag of published haiku, displaying a wide range of strengths and weaknesses. How does each relate to the criteria offered earlier ? Which do you like best ? And which least ? And why ?

- 1 Family picnic  
the new wife's rump  
bigger than mine
- 2 Clothesline  
the widow's black lace panties  
covered in frost
- 3 Holiday romance  
the smell of suntan lotion  
on the pillow case
- 4 Poky hotel  
no room for my shadow  
to unpack
- 5 Discussing divorce  
he strokes  
the lace tablecloth
- 6 Last day --  
a cold spark from two flints  
and then the paper catches
- 7 How cold –  
leek tips  
washed white
- 8 In one shrill cry  
the pheasant has swallowed  
the broad field

By, respectively, Roberta Beary, George Swede, Andrew Shimield, David Cobb, Alexis Rotella, Caroline Gourlay, Matsui Basho, and Yamei.

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### Exploring further

A good start – spanning over three centuries – is to immerse oneself in “the Four Greats” – Basho, Buson, Issa and Shiki and their contemporaries. Although haiku occupy only a third of *The Penguin Book of Zen Poetry* it is still a good buy, thanks to Lucien Stryk’s sympathetic translations. Another of his Penguin translations is *On Love and Barley: Haiku of Basho* (1985). Shorter, but lavishly illustrated and including more contemporary *haijin*, is *British Museum Haiku* edited by David Cobb (British Museum Press, 2002).

*The Haiku Handbook* by William Higginson (Kodansha, Japan, 1985) is an indispensable old favourite. A valuable learning resource is Lee Gurga’s *Haiku: a Poet’s Guide* (Modern Haiku Press, box 68, Lincoln, IL 62656, USA, 2003; send \$20 in dollar bills).

*The New Haiku* is a Western selection edited by John Barlow and Martin Lucas (Snapshot Press, 2002). And a classic collection which concentrates on North American poets is *The Haiku Anthology*, edited by Cor van der Heuvel (3rd ed. W.W.Norton (New York, 1999).

It is well worth joining the British Haiku Society. £25 a year (£22 concessionary) brings you four copies of the *Journal* plus benefits. The Membership Secretary is Steve Mason, The Basement, 67A Offord Rd., London, N1 1EA. Visit the Society’s website: [www.BritishHaikuSociety.co.uk](http://www.BritishHaikuSociety.co.uk) The other indispensable UK journal is *Haiku Presence* (12 Grovehall Ave., Leeds, LS11 7EX). Prominent in the USA are *Frogpond -- Journal of the Haiku Society of America*, and *Modern Haiku*.

There are a great many websites, but a good start can be made at [www.execpc.com/~ohaus/haiklink.htm](http://www.execpc.com/~ohaus/haiklink.htm)

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Ken Jones is a co-editor of the annual volume *Contemporary Haibun*, and contributes regularly to UK haiku magazines, as well as being represented in British and American anthologies. For his contribution to *Pilgrim Foxes: Haiku and Haiku Prose*, co-authored with Jim Norton and Sean O’Connor, he was awarded the Sasakawa Prize for Original Contributions in the Field of Haikai. Recent collections are *Arrow of Stones* (British Haiku Society, 2002); *Stallion’s Crag* (Iron Press, 2003).

Jones is a Zen practitioner of thirty years’ standing, and author of books on socially engaged Buddhism. He lives in Ceredigion, Wales, with his Irish wife, Noragh.