

Haiku

This ancient poetry comes from Japan. Its art form has lately spread around the world. It is poetry restrictive in structure and freeing in content. Traditional haiku consists of no more than 17 syllables, arranged in three lines of 5/7/5 syllables. It is not an absolute rule, I break it occasionally, but conforming to this “rule” helps me stay within the haiku mindset. Rather than constantly fighting to reduce a poem down to 17 syllables, it is amazing how often a haiku poem requires fewer than 17 syllables.

Haiku has always been an art form centered on nature. In 17 syllables, I describe a natural scene or a natural moment in time. Actually, the syllable restriction is even worse than the above description since in those three lines, I describe a scene or a moment two times.

Let’s say I describe a scene in nature. I describe it once, then move farther away or closer to it, or at a different angle, to describe it again. Sometimes, one of the descriptions may be as simple as naming a natural feature. In the example below, the first line simply names a scene many people are familiar with, the Island Lake Trail. This forms a mental image in the reader’s mind of that scene. Then I describe the same feature in a different way.

Of the three lines in a poem, one description usually takes up two lines and the second uses one line. Haiku is mostly devoid of punctuation. I use some punctuation only to clarify the content, merely separating two descriptions with a semi-colon and commas to separate items.

Island Lake Trail;
shade of each pine tree holds
August hikers

As with any poetry, the goal of haiku is to express nature in a way that connects to the human experience. Hikers on the Island Lake Trail know it can be a difficult climb in the August heat.

Haiku was made popular by the 17th-century Japanese haiku master Matsuo Basho. He was born in 1644, near Kyoto, Japan. One of his haiku poems (then called hokku):

On a withered branch
A crow has alighted:
Nightfall in autumn

This forms an image of an autumn sunset in two ways. One simply names it and the other creates a scene that evokes the aura of an autumn sunset.

He made a living as a teacher; but then renounced the social, urban life of the literary circles and wandered throughout the country to gain inspiration for his writing. He shocked Japan with the following poem. Japanese people love the calls, or songs, of frogs and use guidebooks to learn the calls of different species. Thousands of poems have been written about frog songs. In 1686, Basho dared to describe not the sound of the frog, but the sound of the water.

an ancient pond
a frog jumps in
the splash of water

Haibun

Beginning in May 1689, Basho, with his disciple Sora, walked over 1,200 miles, taking over five months to complete this journey around Japan. This journey would provide the material for a new poetic form he created, called haibun. He named this work *Oku no Hosomichi*, or Narrow Road to the Interior.

Haibun is now written worldwide and the form has been adapted into different variations.

Haibun is often used as a travel journal and contains a mixture of haiku and prose. Traditional haibun consists of a short, precise prose description of a place, object, or moment in time, followed by a haiku adding to the portrayal of the same feature.

A typical travelogue has a photograph accompanied by a brief description of the scene in the photo. In my haibun, the haiku poem replaces the photograph. The poem creates the scene much as a photo would record it.

In this book, I describe my various experiences in Lamoille Canyon. Each page describes a moment in time and place, with the contents spread over the four seasons, and takes place over decades of travels through the canyon.