

Haiku Reflections

from *A Field Guide to North American Haiku*¹

Charles Trumbull

The topic of this installment of the Field Guide is reflections and, by extension, mirrors. People have been delighted, impressed, and even frightened by the reflection of objects and living creatures since earliest times. The physical reflection of the moon on still water, the apparition of one's face in a mirror, and the image of the world in reverse are all quite uncanny. So much so that people have looked to reflections for deeper significance: perhaps an inventory of one's youthful good looks or advancing years, advice to the lovelorn, explanations of the past, and prognostications of things to come. Reflections are truly magic.

Neither “reflection” nor “mirror” are standard Japanese seasonal words (*kigo*), but topics such as these were common in classical Japanese haiku. Objects, especially celestial bodies were a favorite topic, for example:

火花せよ淀の御茶屋の夕月夜
hanabi seyo yodo no ochaya no yūzukiyo

Fireworks
reflected in a teahouse pool —
the moonlit evening

Buson, trans. Allan Persinger,
Foxfire: the Selected Poems of Yosa Buson (2013)

¹ “A Field Guide to North American Haiku” is a long-term project along the lines of a haiku encyclopedia-cum-sajiki, a selection of the best English-language haiku arranged by topic and illustrating what it is about a given topic that attracts poets to write. When complete, the Field Guide project will comprise multiple thick volumes keyed to the several topics in traditional Japanese sajiki (haiku almanac) and Western counterparts, notably William J. Higginson’s *Haiku World: An International Poetry Almanac* (1996). These topics are: Season, Sky & Elements, Landscape, Plants, Animals, Human Affairs, and Observances. (cont’d next page)

満山の若葉にうつる朝日哉

manzan no wakaba ni utsuru asahi kana

Reflected in the young leaves
Covering the whole mountain,—
The morning sun!

Shiki, trans. R. H. Blyth,
A History of Haiku 2 (1964)

And one object can reflect off another:

隣から灯火うつる芭蕉哉

tonari kara tomoshibi utsuru bashō kana

lamplight from next door
is reflected off
the banana tree leaves

Shiki, trans. Charles Trumbull

Animals—especially birds and particularly herons—and their reflections have been popular in Japanese- and English-language haiku. Of the 4,000 haiku that I tagged with “reflection” or “mirror” for this article, 626 feature an animal (excluding humans). Of these, the lion’s share (273) are birds, with 40 haiku about herons and their reflections and 30 others featuring cranes, egrets, ibises, flamingos, stilts, and other wading birds. A selection from the Japanese canon:

The haiku are selected from my Haiku Database, currently containing almost 445,000 haiku. “Haiku Reflections” presents parts of “Human Affairs: house & garden: mirror” (3,746 haiku) and Sky & Elements: light: reflection” (3,817 haiku, many also including “mirror”). Publishing these miniature topical haiku anthologies is an experiment to test the feasibility of the larger Field Guide project. Critique and suggestions, supportive or critical, are warmly invited; please comment by e-mail to trumbullc@comcast.net

五月雨に鶴の足短くなれり

samidare ni tsuru no ashi mijikaku nareri

Deep Reflection

Patiently fishing in the lake, the crane's
Long red legs have shortened since the rains.

Bashō, trans. Harold Stewart,
A Net of Fireflies (1960)

水影や鼯わたる藤の棚

mizu-kage ya musasabi wataru fuji no tana

the pond mirrors

a flying squirrel

over the wisteria

Kikaku, trans. Gabriel Rosenstock,
Haiku Enlightenment (2009)

遠山が目玉にうつるとんぼ哉

tōyama ga medama ni utsuru tonbo kana

Distant mountains
mirrored in its eyes —
a dragonfly!

Issa, trans. Richard Tice, *Modern Haiku* 8:2 (May 1977)

行水におのが影追う蜻蛉哉

yuku mizu ni onoga kage ou tonbo kana

in moving water
chasing its reflection,
the dragonfly

Chiyo-ni, *Dr. Michael Haldane's Translation Homepage*

水鏡見るそだちなし蜆とり

mizu kagami miru sodachi nashi shijimi tori

rarely looking
at her reflection in the water—
the shellfish catcher

Chiyo-ni, from a haibun “Pilgrimage to Yoshizaki,”
trans. Patricia Donegan and Yoshie Ishibashi, *Chiyo-ni:
Woman Haiku Master* (1998)

後の月鳴たつあとの水の中

nochi no tsuki shigi tatsu ato no mizu no naka

revealed in the water
after the snipe have flown
the September moon
Buson, trans. C. Trumbull

水鳥やかたに影の腹合せ

mizutori ya katachi ni kage no haraawase

The breast
Of the water-fowl
Meets its reflection.
Mahara, trans. R. H. Blyth, *Haiku 4:
Autumn–Winter* (1952)

My late years —
reflected on coffee
a red dragonfly
Nagata Kōi, trans. Masaya Saito,
Modern Haiku 25:2 (summer 1994)

An animal *drinking* from its reflection is now a cliché. Probably all of us have written at least one such haiku, but the theme has

long since grown stale. I cannot find any Japanese examples of animals drinking from their reflections, but among English-language examples, these are among the earliest and most interesting:

The wounded deer drinks,
and its reflection becomes
a crimson cloud....
James W. Hackett, *Haiku Poetry* (1964)

A drooping hydrangea
drinking the moon's reflection
drains the pool dry.
Nicholas A. Virgilio, *Modern Haiku* 5:1 (1974)

And, of course, Japanese haiku also feature reflections of people, either physically or spiritually, for example:

Shining from the sky ...
reflections drop in my cup
so I drink the stars.
Kay Langdon, *High/Coo* 3:12 (May 1979)

under the mountain —
I drink
my own reflection
Lindsay Forbes, in Cyril Childs, ed.,
The Second New Zealand Haiku Anthology (1998)

Water mirror:
Making you suspect
Your own face a bit.
anonymous, in Geoffrey Bownas and
Anthony Thwaite, eds.,
The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse (1964)

I cleansed the mirror
of my heart—now it reflects
the moon.

Renseki, trans. Yoël Hoffmann,
Japanese Death Poems (1986)

蚊の声や夜深くのぞく掛け鏡

ka no koe ya yo fukaku nozoku kakekagami

A mosquito's whine:
in the depth of night I peer
into a hanging mirror.

Iida Dakotsu, trans. Makoto Ueda, comp. and trans.,
Modern Japanese Haiku: An Anthology (1976)

In the Western tradition, the best known story involving persons and reflections is certainly the myth of Narcissus, the Greek lad who was so devastatingly beautiful that he caused all that encountered him to fall in love with him and, when they were spurned, to kill themselves out of unrequited passion. In some versions of the story, Narcissus, seeing his reflection in a pond but not recognizing his own image, himself fell in love with the beautiful apparition. When he realized that he could never have the object of his desire, he too killed himself and was turned into the beautiful narcissus flower. The dramatic story of Narcissus has infused Western literature, art, psychology (and contemporary politics), and popular culture ever since. One example is this passage from A. E. Houseman's "A Shropshire Lad" (1887), "Look not in my eyes, for fear / The mirror true the sight I see, / And there you find your face too clear / And love it and be lost like me."

The narcissus flower (a variety of daffodil and also called paperwhite in English) appears in Japanese haiku. It is called 水仙 *suisen* and is a late winter *kigo*. The Narcissus myth did

not accompany the flower, however, as the plant made its way from its Mediterranean home soil via China to Japan, so we find no trace of it in classical Japanese haiku, with the exception possibly of this one by Bashō:

水仙や白き障子のとも移り

suisen ya shiroki shōji no tomoutsuri

narcissus—

and the white paper screen,
reflecting each other

Bashō, trans. David Landis Barnhill, *Bashō's Haiku* (2004)

Beyond their simple physical aspects, “mirrors have been studied by cognitive psychology in order to understand self-recognition, self-identity, and self-consciousness. Moreover, the relevance of mirrors in spirituality, magic and arts may also suggest that mirrors can be symbols of unconscious contents. Carl G. Jung investigated mirrors in relation to the unconscious, particularly in *Psychology and Alchemy*.²

Evidence of a mirror’s spiritual and magical properties is legion in folklore. Mirrors reflect far more than a simple image. For one early example, on the 505th of the Arabian Nights, the Lord of the Jann gives Zayn al-Asnam, the hero of the tale, a magical mirror with which to test the virtue of a young woman. The lord instructs him, “if thou see therein her image clear and undimmed, do thou learn forthright that she is a clean maid without aught of defect or default and endowed with every praiseworthy quality. But if, contrariwise, the figure be found darkened or clothed in uncleanness, do thou straightway know that damsel is sullied by soil of sex.”³

² This quote is from the abstract of a fascinating article, Giovanni B. Caputo, “Archetypal-Imaging and Mirror-Gazing” originally published in *Behavioral Science* (Basel) 4:1 (March 2014) and available online at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4219253/>.

³ “The Tale of Zayn Al-Asnam,” from *Burton's Supplement To The Book of 1001 Nights*, Volume 3; http://alhakawati.net/en_stories/StoryDetails/2908/1-The-Tale-of-Zayn-AlAsnam.

Similarly, in Chaucer's "The Squire's Tale" the protagonist tells of four amazing gifts to the Tatar King Cambuscan, one of which is a mirror with the power to warn of future dangers. Alas, useful as they might be to contemporary haiku poets, mirrors like these are no longer available, which is probably why so few haikuists have written about them.

More common among magical mirrors, though, are those used for self-admiration. At a meeting of the C. G. Jung Association in the Netherlands, a noted folklorist spoke about the fairy tale Snow White and the significance of the mirror in it. The vanity and insecurities of the evil queen are reflected in her mirror, to which she regularly turns for assurance and periodic status reports on her beauty, asking, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who in this realm is the fairest of them all?" In the folklorist's reading, "a mirror symbolizes the threshold between consciousness and the unconscious, and by looking into it, one may look towards the depths of the unconscious. And, the image that a mirror produces is symbolic and can be made sense of in both the unconscious and the conscious worlds."

Michael McClintock picked up on the hyper-self-concern that often accompanies fame as in the case of Snow White's queen:

sparse and airy
the V.I.P. room
lined with mirrors

Michael McClintock,
Modern Haiku 40:2 (summer 2009)

The following haiku by Natsume Seibi has the scent of a lonely, vain woman ruing her fading beauty—but is probably not related to the Snow White story:

The departing spring!
A woman complains to the mirror,
All alone

Natsume Seibi, in Ichikawa Sanki et al., eds.,
Haikai and Haiku (1958)

In rear-view mirrors people can see not only what is behind them, but often past events as well:

waiting in line —
she checks her graying hair
in the rear view mirror

Mike Montreuil, *Bottle Rockets* 26 (2012)

after the funeral
she retouches her makeup
in the rear-view mirror

Ross Clark, *Paper Wasp* (2005)

through the rear-view mirror
my kids
entering school

Mark Alan Osterhaus,
Modern Haiku 28:1 (winter–spring 1997)

Other mirrors are more forward-looking and can predict the future:

トイレの鏡に未来の私と空飛ぶ法王

toire no kagami ni mirai no watashi to soratobu hōō

Reflected on the mirror
of the lavatory:
future me and the Flying Pope

Ban'ya Natsuishi, trans., Ban'ya and Jim Kacian,
Flying Pope: 161 Haiku (2008)

in an antique mirror I meet my future self

Stuart Quine, *A Hundred Gourds* 2:4 (September 2013)

my reflection
the pond more covered in leaves
than not
Seren Fargo, 3rd Vladimir Devidé Haiku
Award, 2013, Commended

In Lewis Carroll's, *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice enters a fantastical, topsy-turvy world when she climbs through a mirror. There in the reflection she finds that everything is reversed, even intuition: running helps you remain stationary, walking away from something brings you towards it, chessmen are alive, nursery-rhyme characters exist, etc.

this winter
the rabbit a little late
through the looking glass
Merrill Ann Gonzales, *Shiki Internet Kukai*, February 2011

Through
The Looking Glass
a high speed train
racing backwards
Ken Jones, "Seat 16" [haibun],
Frogpond 31:1 (Winter 2008)

Beyond allusions to Alice in Wonderland, however, other haiku poets have contemplated what it would be like to go through a mirror:

motel mirror—
I too am
just passing through
Peter Yovu, *Modern Haiku 31:1 (winter–spring 2000)*

Still other mirrors reflect one's very soul, or its inversion. Goethe's Mephistopheles has Faust look into a magic mirror and, because reality is reflected in reverse, what Faust sees is

the opposite of his conscious soul. While he is an old, jaded man, the image he sees is a beautiful, young, lively woman. Uncanny as it may be, what Faust sees is his subconscious.

For Jorge Luis Borges a mirror is more than just magical or uncanny, it is terrifying, “an impossible space of reflections” that seems to have an existence, if not a life, of its own:

I see them as infinite, elemental
Executors of an ancient pact,
To multiply the world like the act
Of begetting. Sleepless. Bringing doom.

....

The crystal spies on us. If within the four
Walls of a bedroom a mirror stares,
I am no longer alone. There is someone there.
In the dawn reflections mutely stage a show.⁴

The reflected image has taken on a soul of its own that is eerily monitoring the poet.

I saw the sky entire
peer at us, naked,
through the mirror.

Orlando González Esteva, *Ginyu 30* (April 2006)

So the mirror is the dwelling place that contains the soul. Since at least Roman times, breaking a mirror is supposed to bring seven years' bad luck, presumably because the soul is ruptured or because it escapes the confinement of the looking glass.

shards of mirror
reflect hundreds of me ...
just my luck

Tom Conally, *Shiki Internet Kukai*, February 2011

⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, “Mirrors: A Poem!” in his *Dreamtigers*, trans. Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 60–61.

The curse involved can be worse than seven years' bad luck. Witness the lady in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's lyric poem "The Lady of Shalott," who has been placed under a curse and knows she must endlessly remain at her loom. She must not look directly out her window onto the nearby town of Camelot. Rather, she follows the festivities in the town only in a mirror. Then, when the bold and handsome Sir Lancelot rides into Camelot, the lady is irresistibly drawn away from her weaving and looks out directly on the town, with predictable results:

Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me,' cried
The Lady of Shalott.

Tennyson's poem has inspired many other creative endeavors, including the title for one of Agatha Christie's bestselling mysteries, *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1962), and a musical setting of "The Lady of Shalott" by Canadian singer-songwriter Loreena McKennitt recorded in 1991. However, I was disappointed not to find any worthy haiku dealing with the Lady of Shalott's mirror or even about Camelot itself. Rather, haiku poets—many of them anyway—have chosen to use a cracked or broken mirror as a metaphor for the poet's fragmented personality. This idea is so popular that it has become a cliché, but here are a few of the more original takes on the idea:

A broken mirror
But every fragment reflects
An entire picture
Nonee Nolan, *Modern Haiku* 1:2 (Spring 1970)

Broken mirror in the stream
I look more deeply
into myself
George Swede, *Modern Haiku* 19:1
(Winter–Spring 1988)

saved from rubbish
the broken mirror
my two faces

Lequita Vance-Watkins, *When Butterflies Come*
(*HSA Members' Anthology 1993*)

after the argument
pieces of myself
in the broken mirror

Marco Fraticelli, in Maxianne Berger and
Angela Leuck, eds., *Sun Through the Blinds* (2003)

pieces of me everywhere broken mirror

Pris Campbell, *Under the Bashō 1.1* (Autumn 2013)

Broken mirror in the stream
I look more deeply
into myself

George Swede, *Modern Haiku 19:1* (Winter–Spring 1988)

broken mirror
in each piece
the same eyes

Grzegorz Sionkowski, *World Haiku Review 4* (2005)

But Karen Cesar feels even more whole than before when her
mirror breaks:

shattered mirror —
each image of myself
whole

Karen Cesar, *The Heron's Nest 8:4* (December 2006)

Steven Hobson's haiku has an interesting inversion of the
adjectives:

cold mirror
and beside it
a cracked moon

Stephen Hobson, *B russels Sprout* 4:3/4 (1987)

While shaving, many men see someone else in the mirror,
typically their father:

今朝秋や見入る鏡に等の顔

kesa aki ya miiru kagami ni oya no kao

First autumn morning:
the mirror I stare into
shows my father's face

Murakami Kijō, trans. Makoto Ueda,
Modern Japanese Haiku: An Anthology (1976)

Years after his death
My father watches me
Shaving

Marco Fraticelli, *Asahi Haikuist Network*, Feb. 5, 2016

But sometimes men see other versions of themselves—even
some famous selves—for example:

I quit shaving
but the eyes that glanced at me
remained in the mirror.

Allen Ginsberg, *White Shroud: Poems 1980–1985* (1986)

What the shaving satyr
In the mirror mocked at,
He bought with his life.

Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (1964)

Vietnam

shaving in my helmet
someone else's face
in the mirror

Dennis H. Dutton [Karma Tenzing Wangchuk],
Pine-Nut Gathering (1998)

The same is not usually the case in haiku with women looking into the mirror. Like Snow White's queen, most women, it is reported, use a mirror to admire their image or out of concerns about advancing age or waning beauty:

我雪を水にうつしてにらみけり
ware yuki o mizu ni utsushite niramiki

staring
at my snow-white reflection
in the water

Chiyo-ni, trans. Patricia Donegan and
Yoshie Ishibashi, *Chiyo-ni: Woman Haiku Master* (1998)

菅笠を着て鏡見る茶摘かな
sugegasa o kite kagami miru chatsumi kana

Wearing her sedge-hat
She preens before the mirror,
A tea-leaf picker.

Kagami Shikō, in Daniel C. Buchanan,
One Hundred Famous Haiku (1973)

laurel in bloom;
she lingers awhile
at the mirror

John Wills, *Cicada 1:3* (1977)

plucking out another gray hair shattered mirror
Pamela A. Babusci, from a sequence “In My Cupped
Hands,” *Point Judith Light*, Fall–Winter 1998

i’m older too she says from the mirror
Bob Boldman, *Brussels Sprout* 4:2 (1986)

the day after she died—
staring at the mirror
my roots showing
Alexa Selph, *Modern Haiku* 40:3 (Autumn 2009)

that old woman
don’t know who she is
in the mirror
Marcyn Del Clements, from a sequence
“This Too Too Fragile Veil”
in Robert Epstein, ed.,
All the Way Home: Aging in Haiku (2019)

crying
she moves deeper
into the mirror
Scott L. Montgomery, *Brussels Sprout* 2:1 (1981)

in the mirror
a leaf
already fallen
Erin Castaldi, *Human/Kind Journal* 1:1
(January 2019)

There often seems to be a sort of identity between the woman
and her image, such that when she has departed this life her
mirrors are void:

Since she has gone ...
all her mirrors
are empty.

Jaye Giammarino, *Modern Haiku* 4:1 (1973)

What if a person or thing has no reflection at all? Does that indicate soullessness?

no reflection
on the riverbank
dead narcissi

Andrew Machon, *Still* 1:1 (Spring 1997)

In a mirror
a vampire admires
his imagined face

John Sandbach, *Invisible Castle* (2013)

I'm told that vampires and demons do not project images in a mirror, but curiously ghosts apparently do. Who knew?

as I enter the dark room
a figure approaches —
the ghost in the mirror

Bob Brill, *Prune Juice* 5 (Winter 2011)

shape-shifting ghosts
pursue my
rear-view mirror

Joanna Ashwell, *Simply Haiku* 3:3 (Autumn 2005)

Jerry Kilbride makes an inverted play on life and death in the Narcissus legend, even alluding to one of Narcissus's spurned lovers, Echo, a forest nymph who was unable to speak except to repeat the speech of others:

window reflection
does not echo
the wind chimes

Jerry Kilbride, *Wind Chimes* 6 (Fall 1982), 1

And finally, it may be of interest to note that in recent years,
mirrors have taken on a new uses and meanings:

the collected light
of a multi-mirror telescope
my daughter's smile

Deborah P Kolodji, *Clouds Peak* 1 (July 1, 2006)

mirror mirror
every time she does a line she shuts her eyes
Ed Markowski, from a haibun "For Ingrid,"
Bottle Rockets 22 (11:2, 2010)