

Field Guide

Oysters

from *A Field Guide to North American Haiku*¹

by Charles Trumbull

La luna

*Es mar la noche negra;
la nube es una concha,
la luna es una perla ...*

José Juan Tablada

The Moon

A sea is the black night
the cloud is a seashell
the moon is a pearl ...

Trans. C. Trumbull²

Finding Haiku in Oysters

The oyster is a bivalve mollusk that thrives in marine or brackish water, typically bays and estuaries. Oysters have been a nutritious, plentiful, and staple food in coastal areas around the world since ancient times. They have been cultivated in China and Japan since at least 2000 B.C., in England and France since Roman times, and in Australia and along the American Atlantic coast from the late 1880s.

The Japanese haiku tradition recognize many terms related to *Crassostrea gigas* (牡蠣, *kaki*) the giant Pacific oyster, as *kigo*, nearly all of them appropriate for winter. Most deal with the harvesting and consumption of the humble mollusk. A few selected examples³:

Pacific or Japanese oysters; “true” oysters	真牡蠣 <i>magaki</i>
“flowers of the rocks”	岩花 <i>kaki</i>
oyster shells	牡蠣殻 <i>kakigara</i>

gathering oysters	牡蠣採 <i>kakitori</i>
cracking oysters open	牡蠣打 <i>kaki uchi</i>
breaking oysters open	牡蠣割る <i>kakiwaru</i>
peeling oysters	牡蠣むく <i>kaki muku</i>
women oyster shuckers	牡蠣割女 <i>kakiwari me</i>
boiled rice with oysters	牡蠣飯 <i>kakimeshi</i>
rice gruel with oysters	牡蠣雑炊 <i>kaki zoosui</i>
oysters marinated in vinegar	酢牡蠣 <i>sugaki</i>
oysters fried on the beach	牡蠣どて焼 <i>kaki doteyaki</i>
deep fried oysters	牡蠣フライ <i>kaki furai</i>
first oysters of the season (a late autumn kigo)	初牡蠣 <i>hatsugaki, hatsu kaki</i>

In preparing this article, however, we found relatively few oyster haiku in Japanese. There are one or two each by the classical poets Bashō, Buson, and Issa, none by Chiyo-ni, and a small handful by Shiki. Twentieth-century Japanese poets have been somewhat more productive.

Bashō, however, had an interesting take on the oyster: he was concerned with their weight in their shells, as made clear in this haiku:

牡蠣よりは海苔をば老の売りもせで
kaki yori wa nori o-ba oi no uri mo se de

Dried seaweed rather than
 heavy oysters, he should
 Vend in his old age.

Bashō / trans. Oseko Toshiharu⁴

As an important aspect of life and nutrition in the East and West from ancient times, oysters have had significance in mythology, religion, and culture in many areas:

[The oyster represents] the womb, the creative power of the feminine watery principle and cosmic life; it is the power of the waters, lunar — ‘the sacredness of the moon’ — and in Chinese symbolism the yin and fertility. Its closed form makes it a natural symbol of secrecy — ‘as close as an oyster’ [said of Dickens’s Scrooge]. In Christianity it represents the Old and New Testaments joined in the Bible, creating pure pearls of divine truth [e.g., “pearl of great price” and not casting “pearls before swine.”] The Bestiaries say that the oyster is tricked by the crab, which inserts a pebble in the oyster when open and thus cheats the oyster’s innocence, just as the Devil does with people.⁵

In Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Falstaff is told, “the world’s mine oyster, which I with sword will open,” meaning essentially “I have limitless opportunities, though success may be difficult.”

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Western haiku poets, however, have paid little attention to most of these traditional antecedents. Of much greater interest to them are oyster ecology, farming and eating the mollusks, and the pearls they produce.

The Private Life of an Oyster

岩黝く憂愁の牡蠣うすびやかる
iwa kuroku yūshū no kaki usubikaru

The rocks are dark
and a melancholy oyster
faintly gleams.

Tomizawa Kakio / trans. Makoto Ueda⁶

While the oyster lacks a brain, it has been suggested that they can have cognitive, intellectual, and ethical capabilities and that these might serve as some sort of metaphor for us humans. Bashō wrote of an octopus's dreams, so why not another mollusk?

まだ夢を見てゐる牡蠣を食ひにけり
mada yume o miteiru kaki o kuinikeri

I eat an oyster
it is still
dreaming

Seki Etsushi / trans. Fay Aoyagi⁷

dreaming in another language
an oyster dies
beside an oyster

Scott Terrill⁸

Are they capable of telling the truth?

lifetime of lies
the last breathable air
inside an oyster

paul m.⁹

Can oysters communicate with one another?

beneath the waves
the pearled words
of oysters

Gregory Longenecker¹⁰

In one of his “bifids,” George Swede invites readers to make long associative leap:

oyster space

George Swede¹¹

David J Kelly advances the long view:

pearls before time
sediment swirls through
the oyster bed

David J Kelly¹²

and Robert Epstein offers another provocative speculation:

could it be so
the afterlife
a pearl

Robert Epstein¹³

Oysters as an Aphrodisiac

Back down at sea level, the website of an oyster bar in Houston, Texas, addresses one of the more intriguing beliefs about oysters:

One of the most enduring myths surrounding oysters revolves around their reputation as an aphrodisiac. This belief dates back to ancient times when people observed that consuming oysters seemed to spark heightened desire and passion. This association likely stems from the oyster's rich nutritional profile, containing zinc, amino acids, and certain hormones that might indirectly support a healthy libido. While scientific evidence is inconclusive regarding their direct aphrodisiac effects, the myth persists, woven into the fabric of romantic tales and culinary lore.¹⁴

Always at the ready, haiku poets take up the challenge:

first date
eating the oysters
he used to hate

Carol Raisfeld¹⁵

she loves me
she loves me not
shucking oysters

Gregory Piko¹⁶

oyster bar
the aftertaste
of fertility

Lee Gurga¹⁷

raw oysters
she remembers
her first time

Genie Nakano¹⁸

honeymoon
the largest oysters
on the menu

Agnes Eva Savich¹⁹

fresh oysters —
she remembers
her first husband

Stephen Addiss²⁰

oyster omelet
I break an extra egg
for the fetus

Emiko Miyashita²¹

牡飯冷えたりいつもの細君
kaki-meshi hie-tari itsumo no saikun

Oyster stew
has become cold —
same old
wife of mine.

Kawahigashi Hekigodō / trans. Makoto Ueda²²

Then too, powdered pearls are sometimes used as a love potion.

While all this may be true, I believe it is the suggestive appearance and texture of a raw oyster in its shell that evokes the erotic associations of the mollusk.

"They're not all the same"
says the gynecologist
eating oysters.

Alan Pizzarelli²³

Or more graphically:

Flower of your flesh
Within its tender petals
lies a hidden pearl

Denis Thériault²⁴

The *Urban Dictionary* informs me that "shucking oysters" is slang for taking girls' virginity.²⁵

Oysters as a Delicacy

In the old days in the Northern Hemisphere, wild (i.e., not farmed) oysters were to be consumed only in months containing the letter "R" (September through April) lest one invite severe gastrointestinal problems.

Eat Oysters at a Risk

Chuckled a mollusk to his brother,
"One of us has salmonella —
shall we let them guess?"

J. Merrick Fowler²⁶

This is not as great a concern in modern times since most oysters are farmed under controlled environmental conditions.

Preparing oysters for the table may require a bit of work:

setting sun —
a shucker's knife
at the oyster's hinge

Alan S. Bridges²⁷

after the dentist
prying open
the oyster

Bill Pauly²⁸

mother's secrets ...
I prise open
a dozen oysters

Lorin Ford²⁹

Feasting on oysters is often associated, especially in Japan, with
January and the New Year:

first laughter ...
she offers him
oysters

Stella Pierides³⁰

Oysters are typically consumed together with saké, especially
by those with discriminating palates. The results are perhaps
predictable:

牡蠣船の揺ると知らず酔ひにけ
kaki bune no yururu to shirazu yoi ni keri

I got drunk
without realizing the oyster boat
was rocking

Yoshida Tōyō / trans. C. Trumbull³¹

牡蠣汁や居續けしたる二日酔
kaki-jiru ya kyo tsudzuki keshitaru futsuka yo

oyster soup —
on a two-day
drunk

Masaoka Shiki / trans. C. Trumbull³²

The rationale for drinking copious amounts with oysters may be different in North America, but the outcome is likely similar:

Oyster Festival
black beer drunk by the gallon
helps dull the taste

Pat Benedict Campbell³³

Or more seriously, some poets suggest a causal link between the high life of oyster-eaters and social dysfunction:

city in tumult
against a backdrop of snow
martinis and oysters

Ash Evan Lippert³⁴

Other haikuists wax poetic, positively or negatively, about the sensation of eating oysters and things it reminds them of:

牡蠣噛めば窓なき部屋のごときかな
kaki kameba mado naki heya no gotoki kana

chewing an oyster
it's like a room
without windows

Satō Ayaka / trans. Fay Aoyagi³⁵

Some diners may be concerned that oysters serve on the half shell are still alive:

oyster hearts
still beating in the half-shell
winter sea

Stephanie Baker³⁶

More often, though, eating oysters is simply an occasion for joyful celebration:

asahi no naka de namagaki tabete no ni kurasu

In the rising sun
eating a few oysters ... just being alive
on this earth!

Kaneko Tohta³⁷

Oyster Shells

The shells of oysters are more than a mere byproduct. Some species are bred especially for the beauty of their shells. In terms of color and luster, for example, oyster shells remind haiku poets of the Moon:

full moon
all the curves
in an oyster shell

Andrea Grillo³⁸

promising nothing more
than a walk by the sea ...
oyster shell moon

Francine Banwarth³⁹

And the shells can have metaphoric overtones:

a grain of sand
in the oyster shell
seven year itch

Leah Ann Sullivan⁴⁰

dinner for two
between our silence
the oyster shells

Fay Aoyagi⁴¹

eating the oyster
i set its shell adrift
a trip to Oki Isle

Dhugal Lindsay⁴²

or other strange things:

草原に思いが到る牡蠣の殻
sōgen ni omoi ga itaru kaki no kara

They make me think
of a grassy meadow —
oyster shells

Tanuma Fumio / trans. Modern Haiku Association⁴³

Oyster shells have practical uses, for example for paving:

light rain the rising scent of an oyster shell trail

Bill Cooper⁴⁴

Supper-time
the crunch of oyster shells
on the old swamp path ...

Roberta Stewart⁴⁵

a doe's leap
darkens the oyster shell road
twilight

Peggy Willis Lyles⁴⁶

And, of course, they are the source of mother-of-pearl (aka nacre), much valued for decorative and craft work:

うめ散や螺鈿こぼるゝ卓の上
ume chiru ya raden koboruru shoku no ue

inlaid mother-of-pearl
 all over the table
 fallen plum flowers

Buson / trans. W.S. Merwin
 and Takako Lento⁴⁷

A keepsake
 mother-of-pearl comb —
 hair getting thin

Satō Yuko⁴⁸

white plum blossoms —
 mother-of-pearl on the Korean chest
 gathers the dawn

Emiko Miyashita⁴⁹

and can have metaphoric meanings too:

first affair
 under a mother of pearl
 moon

Raymond Roseliep⁵⁰

Pearls

Without venturing too deeply into the topic, it seems important to share a few haiku about pearls, the incidental but highly prized product of the pearl oyster, a different family from the true oyster.

The pearl verses selected here make mention of the oyster. Note too that all are by women poets and most have a feminine, not to say feminist, significance.

The soul ... a pearl
in an oyster resting
on the ocean floor.

Dorothy Mitchell Bechhold⁵¹

surfacing
with a pearl oyster —
new moon

Lorin Ford⁵²

pearl in the oyster I release

Sabine Miller⁵³

Pearl of the oyster shell after the pearl

Peggy Willis Lyles⁵⁴

an asian girl
shucking oysters
pearls at her throat

Gloria H. Procsal⁵⁵

shucking oysters —
the moon reflected
in a pearl

Hortensia Anderson⁵⁶

oyster pearls
finding myself again
after motherhood

Christina Sng⁵⁷

核入れの女貝かなしもそぞろ寒
kakuire no megai kanashimo sozorozamu

Planting a pearl seed
into a helpless she-oyster —
early autumn chill

Yoshino Yoshiko / trans. Lee Gurga
and Emiko Miyashita⁵⁸

There are hundreds more “pearl” haiku in English, but that’s a topic for another day and another Field Guide episode.

- ¹ A Field Guide to North American Haiku is a long-term project along the lines of a haiku encyclopedia-cum-*saijiki*, a selection of the best haiku in English 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 *saijiki* (haiku almanacs) 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. The haiku in this essay are taken from my Haiku Database, currently containing more than 586,000 entries, and selected from about 700 haiku about oysters, pearls, and related topics. Critique and suggestions of this article or the Field Guide project are warmly invited; please comment by email to cptrumbull@comcast.net.
- ² Tablada, Spanish from *El rincón de haiku* website (accessed June 2001); English from Charles Trumbull, "One Hundred Bridges, One Hundred Traditions in Haiku," *Modern Haiku* 41:2 (Summer 2010).
- ³ From Gabi Greve, ed., "Oysters," *World Kigo Database*, posted March 25, 2006.
- ⁴ Jane Reichhold, in her *Basho: The Complete Haiku* (2008), seems to get it backward: "it is oysters / not dried seaweed one should sell / when one is old."
- ⁵ J. C. Cooper, *Dictionary of Symbolic & Mythological Animals* (Glasgow, U.K.: Thorsons (HarperCollins), ©1992), 183.
- ⁶ Tomizawa, in Makoto Ueda, *Modern Japanese Haiku: An Anthology* (1976).
- ⁷ Seki, in *Shinsen* 21 (December 2009) / Aoyagi trans. in *Roadrunner* X:1 (2010).
- ⁸ Terrill, in *Notes from the Gean* 4:1 (June 2011).
- ⁹ paul m., in *Roadrunner* IX:3 (August 2009).
- ¹⁰ Longenecker, in *Tinywords* 17:1 (April 6, 2017).
- ¹¹ Swede, *Bifids* (1984).
- ¹² Kelly, *Small Hadron Divider: Haiku* (2020).
- ¹³ Epstein, Preface, *Haiku Forest Afterlife* (2014).
- ¹⁴ Tommy's Restaurant & Oyster Bar website: <https://tommys.com/blog/three-myths-about-oysters/>.
- ¹⁵ Raisfeld, photo-haiku in *Prune Juice* 28 (July 2019).
- ¹⁶ Piko, 6th Annual H. Gene Murtha Memorial Senryu Contest, 2021, Highly Commended.
- ¹⁷ Gurga, in *Mariposa* 47 (Autumn–Winter 2022).
- ¹⁸ Nakano, in Michael Dylan Welch and William Hart, eds., *Close to the Wind* (Haiku North America 2013 conference anthology).
- ¹⁹ Savich, in *Kingfisher* 2 (2020).
- ²⁰ Addiss, in *South by Southeast* 6:3 (1999).
- ²¹ Miyashita, in *Tundra* 2 (2001).
- ²² Hekigodō, in Makoto Ueda, comp. and trans., *Modern Japanese Haiku: An Anthology* (1976).
- ²³ Pizzarelli, in *Frozen Socks* (2015).

- ²⁴ Thériault, *Postman's Round* (2008).
- ²⁵ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Shucking%20the%20oyster>.
- ²⁶ Fowler, in *Parnassus Literary Journal* 20:4 (Winter 1996).
- ²⁷ Bridges, in *Acorn* 37 (Fall 2016).
- ²⁸ Pauly, HPNC San Francisco International Senryu Contest 2007, First Place.
- ²⁹ Ford, FreeXpresSion Haiku Competition, 2014, First Place.
- ³⁰ Pierides, in *Shiki Internet Kukai*, January 2014.
- ³¹ Translated from the Japanese and a German version by Satō Kihakusō on <http://www.woo8.upp.so-net.ne.jp/kihakuso/html/o4sai/#4-4-186> (no longer accessible): "Das Schiff für die Auster schaukelt, / das kann't (ich) nicht, / dann seekrank."
- ³² Matsuyama Municipal Shiki-Kinen Museum, Shiki haiku database, Winter 3619.
- ³³ Campbell, in *Asahi Haikuist Network*, July 15, 2016.
- ³⁴ Lippert, in *Suspect Device*, June 2022.
- ³⁵ Satō, in Fay Aoyagi, ed., *Blue Willow Haiku World*, December 27, 2009.
- ³⁶ Baker, in *Acorn* 44, Spring 2020.
- ³⁷ Review of Tōta, *Cet été-là, j'étais soldat* (2018) original French translation by Seegan Mabesoone, English version probably by Gilles Fabre, *Seashores* 1 (October 2018). Original Japanese not found.
- ³⁸ Grillo, in *Presence* 34 (January 2008).
- ³⁹ Banwarth, in *Acorn* 21 (Fall 2008).
- ⁴⁰ Sullivan, in *Shiki Internet Kukai*, June 2008.
- ⁴¹ Aoyagi, in *Geppo* 21:2 (1999).
- ⁴² Lindsay, Per Diem Archive (theme: Trends), *THF* website, 2011.
- ⁴³ Tanuma, in *Modern Haiku Association*, Japanese Haiku 2001.
- ⁴⁴ Cooper, *The Fingertips of a Glassblower* (2016).
- ⁴⁵ Stewart, in *Modern Haiku* 7:2 (May 1976).
- ⁴⁶ Lyles, *To Hear the Rain* (2002).
- ⁴⁷ Japanese from *Buson haikushū* (1935); English from Merwin and Lento, *Collected Haiku of Yosa Buson* (2013).
- ⁴⁸ Satō, in *HI (Haiku International)* 123 (March 2016). Japanese not found.
- ⁴⁹ Miyashita, in *The Heron's Nest* 4:4 (April 2002).
- ⁵⁰ Roseliep, from the sequence "Beneath the Visiting Moon—Shakespeare," *High/Coo* 4:15 (February 1980).
- ⁵¹ Bechhold, in *Modern Haiku* 2:1 (Winter 1970).
- ⁵² Ford, in *Simply Haiku* 6:3 (Summer 2008).
- ⁵³ Miller, in *Roadrunner* VII:4 (November 2007).
- ⁵⁴ Lyles, in *Wind Chimes* 7 (Winter 1983).
- ⁵⁵ Procsal, in *Haiku Quarterly* (Arizona) 1:2 (Summer 1989).
- ⁵⁶ Anderson, in *Mainichi Haiku in English*, February 29, 2012.
- ⁵⁷ Sng, in Wild Plum Haiku Contest 2017, Honorable Mention.
- ⁵⁸ Yoshino, *Tsuru* (2001).