

Getting Started with Haiku

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“To a clear eye the smallest fact is a window through which the infinite may be seen.”

~Thomas Henry Huxley

“The soul never thinks without an image.”

~Aristotle

“Those moments before a poem comes, when the heightened awareness comes over you, and you realize a poem is buried there somewhere, you prepare yourself. I run around, you know, kind of skipping around the house, marvelous elation. It’s as though I could fly.”

~Anne Sexton

How does one get started in writing haiku? All poets face the repeated task of moving from inspiration to words. It’s not always easy. The following practical tips about process might help beginners, and also interest more-seasoned poets who are involved in helping others learn the art of haiku. The English poet and scholar Thomas Gray once said, “Poetry is thoughts that breathe, and words that burn.” But how do you get from the breathing thought to the burning word?

One suggestion is to begin by jotting down selected experiences that happen to you every day, focusing on how you experience those small events through your five senses. For example, just now a car drove past my house, and I heard its sound fade in and out as it drove past. That’s a seed for a haiku—maybe not a good one, but maybe it is. You never know. That’s how haiku starts for me—by closely noticing even the simplest of experiences, and then forming words to describe them plainly and directly, without judgment. The idea is to start with things as they are, focusing on nouns and one of the five senses. A key technique to remember is this: Instead of writing about your emotions, write about what *caused* your emotions. Here’s a start:

the sound fades away
from a passing car

So this is two lines, but just one phrase. A good haiku nearly always has two parts, and one of the parts is like the preceding two lines. Although it's presented in two lines, it still reads as a single phrase (just one part). Now it needs a third line (its second part) to go with it, and that's where haiku gets a little more difficult. For me it's good to think at right angles to a main image, to think about what else is going on out the corner of my eye, so to speak. And sometimes, what is at right angles isn't an image but a context or setting. That's where the other line comes from, often—and it could be a first or third line. Perhaps this:

foreclosure notice—
the sound fades away
from a passing car

I hope there's a feeling of sadness or emptiness here. The house across the street from where I live was recently foreclosed on, and had a big white foreclosure notice on the front door. The house is currently up for auction, so many cars have been stopping by as people check the place out. This poem isn't about those cars that have stopped (in fact, they're not part of the poem at all), but about any car that passes by, perhaps oblivious to the foreclosed house. Notice how the first two lines I originally wrote didn't have anything in the poem itself about a house, yet the foreclosure notice brings a house to mind, without saying it. This allows the reader to have a gestalt sort of realization (even if small). He or she can put together the setting with the emotion of being in or seeing that passing car, whether aware of the foreclosure or oblivious to it. Either way, we undoubtedly feel compassion for the stress of foreclosure, even if it is someone else's.

The poem may also make a compassionate reader wonder about the observer in the poem (known as the poem's "persona"—usually presumed to be the author, but one cannot always assume this). Is the observer *in* the house? In a nearby house? Walking by? What is the relationship of the observer to the foreclosed house? As we contemplate these questions, we can feel empathy for the observer, and also for the people who live (or lived) in the foreclosed house, whether that's the observer or not.

Inspiration for haiku, of course, can come from many places, whether through life's experiences filtered through our five senses, from memory, from stories, or even television images. Sometimes, when I'm stuck with a poem, I like to go to random word generators online. More often than not, if I click a few times, I'll get past my block. I also have a book on my shelf by Barbara Ann Kipfer, called *14,000 Things to Be Happy About*, which is a wonderful list of everyday objects and events that the author is grateful for—and it's a superb resource for haiku ideas. I just opened it at random and found "crocuses" on page 407, and "clean sheets" on page 263. Yes, I could write about those subjects, especially if I tap into my personal memories to make sure my poem feels authentic to the reader rather than contrived. I immediately think of the first purple crocuses I saw breaking through melting snow when I lived in Alberta.

For years now, I've felt that a haiku needs to create some sort of "vacuum" by leaving something out. This vacuum sucks readers in until they think about something unstated. Perhaps not much is unstated in my foreclosure poem, except the feeling of sadness and empathy, but I hope it offers at least that. Readers may also wonder about what a passing car might symbolize—perhaps an uncaring public, or perhaps someone who's going to his or her own house that isn't foreclosed upon, which creates contrast. These possibilities are what make these lines an "unfinished poem," which is how the Japanese poet Seisensui once described haiku. This "unfinished" nature, when done right, is what creates the vacuum that draws in the reader, and it's often accomplished by the careful juxtaposition of the haiku's two parts. In Japanese, this technique employs what's called a *kireji*, or cutting word, that divides the poem into two parts, both grammatically and imagistically, and it's exactly this technique that can help you create a "vacuum" in haiku.

Creating implication and an intuitive leap between two often fragmentary parts is perhaps the most difficult art that haiku has to offer, yet also its greatest reward. It's one thing to make a grammatical or imagistic shift, but it's quite another for the

two parts to generate some sort of magical relationship when paired together. The point is that the two parts of the poem shouldn't be $1+1=2$, but somehow be $1+1=3$. It should be like mixing vinegar and baking soda—voom! The vacuum of leaving something out is one way you can make the poem more than the sum of its parts. This art of creating a haiku vacuum doesn't have to be hard, though. If you trust what occurs to you, provided your juxtaposition is not too close or similar to the original image (too obvious) or too far away (too obscure), then it just might work.

For examples of poems that create a vacuum, here are two from the *Millikin University Haiku Anthology* (Decatur, Illinois: Bronze Man Books, 2008). Most students whose work appears in the book are new to haiku, yet they pull them off, frequently creating effective “vacuums” in their poems. This first poem is by Eva Schwartz (page 63):

sitting on the edge
of the bathtub
pink line

Is there a high-water mark around the tub? If so, why would it be pink? No, that doesn't make sense. Rather, the person in the poem has just taken a pregnancy test, and the device's test result line is pink, indicating, I believe, that she is pregnant. What a moment, and so subtly stated just by referring to the pink line. So much is left out, yet it's all clearly implied, if you give the poem sufficient attention, sometimes eliminating, just as I did, a possible misreading. That's exactly the vacuum that a good haiku creates.

Here's another example from the same anthology, this time by Megan Klein (page 129):

speechless at her news
his gaze drops
to her navel

By chance, this poem is also about pregnancy. The reference to the girl's news and her navel makes this clear. It is common for haiku to indicate a season. Neither of these two poems suggests a season (some readers might feel that these poems are therefore senryu rather than haiku), but they compensate in an understated way by deftly referring to that special season of pregnancy. T. S. Eliot talked about the "objective correlative," the bond of emotion to objects in poetry, and there is indeed emotion, deep emotion, in that pink line and a woman's navel if she has some "news."

Returning to the foreclosure poem, it too doesn't have a season reference (called a *kigo*, or season word, in Japanese). I'm reasonably happy with the poem the way it is, though, and adding a seasonal reference in this case might just mangle it. However, writing any poem's third line—the juxtaposed part—could present the opportunity in some poems to inject a seasonal element. Here's an attempt:

snowy bus shelter—
the sound fades away
from a passing car

Here we can feel a different sort of loneliness, of being left behind on a cold snowy day, and feel longing for the warmth of a bus or that passing car. And notice how the season changes the sound, too. In my foreclosure version, I imagine summer, or at least not winter, and thus I hear a regular road noise from the passing car. But now, in winter, perhaps the road is wet or snowy, and thus louder, as wet roads often are, or quieter, which they might be with a lot of snow.

I wonder, though, if this version suffers from being just a description, with too obvious a connection between the person at the bus shelter, wanting a ride, and envy for a car that passes by. There is at least a seasonal element, but maybe the results aren't quite good enough. Perhaps the other version is better, because it has more gravitas. And this is the point where you have to put on your editor hat and decide which version works best for you. Or share both versions with friends, especially if

they're poets, to see which version they prefer, and why. They might suggest that the poem be revised to fit a 5-7-5-syllable structure, but it's worth some research to understand that the traditional Japanese pattern is based on sounds, not syllables, and that 5-7-5 isn't necessary in English. Indeed, it's worth understanding why this pattern isn't followed by the vast majority of accomplished haiku poets publishing literary haiku in English.

Another way to put on your editor hat is to ask if these words are in the best order or if they express the preferred moment most efficiently. Writing haiku is all about making choices. Here's the "foreclosure" version of this poem with an alternative ending, which changes the poem's emphasis:

foreclosure notice—
the sound of a passing car
fades away

The previous version focused on the sound of the car, but this version emphasizes the fading of that sound. But you can make other choices, too. Instead of a car, what if the vehicle were an ambulance or a fire truck? Or an ice cream truck? These and other options each lend a different tone to the poem. The sound of a receding emergency vehicle might be too close to the financial emergency of a foreclosure, and merely saying "car" might be too flat. Adding "ice cream truck" to the preceding poem would make for a very long middle line, so how about changing the poem to focus on the *truck* coming and going instead of just its sound? This would allow the truck's ice cream jingle, of course, to be implied.

foreclosure notice—
an ice cream truck
comes and goes

There comes a point, you might notice, when you try too hard, revise too much, and beat the poem to death. Is this last version the way to go? Or might it be better to stick with an earlier version? When a poem goes through many revisions, sometimes

it's vital to step back and inhale deeply. Go back to the original experience and see if you've caught it well—the moment of poetic inspiration that poet Richard Hugo called the “triggering town.” And ask yourself if that experience really is what you want to capture, or if the poem's evolution in a different direction is okay with you. When you find yourself asking these questions and reaching answers that satisfy you, then you've moved beyond getting started with haiku and you're well on your way.

For my own part, I think I like the “ice cream truck” version of my foreclosure poem best. While there may be a cause-and-effect reason why the ice cream truck comes and goes (the foreclosed house is empty, so no one will be coming out for ice cream), I think there's a deeper sadness to the contrast between the necessity of housing and the treat of ice cream. And perhaps, too, the foreclosure will come and go like the ice cream truck, and maybe things will be better down the road. On the other hand, this version moves away somewhat from the initial experience, so I confess that I like “foreclosure notice— / the sound of a passing car / fades away” as well, and might even consider them separate poems.

As Robert Frost once said, “Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words.” This is how a haiku comes about for many people—starting with a sensory experience (especially if it gives you a particular emotional feeling), trying to put that experience into words, and trying different versions. Then you can think about what works and what doesn't. It takes practice. And the best way to practice, of course, is to get started.



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