

## Haiku Diction: The Use of Words in Haiku

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Haiku has been described as “the wordless poem.” Because of need for brevity, the haiku poet must use language with extreme economy and accuracy and employ techniques that are very different from those used in crafting Western-style poems. In this essay we will explore the poetics and aesthetics of English-language haiku as they apply to the poet’s choice and deployment of words.

In working with words, there are three basic strategies that a haiku poet can adopt:

1. minimizing the number of words in the first place
2. being sure that every word used is the right one
3. making each word as full of meaning as possible

We’ll look at some of these approaches, concentrating on questions of simplicity and conciseness of language, levels of poetic diction and choice of words, the use of metaphor and simile, the importance of allusion, and related questions of the haiku craft.

### Haiku and Conventional Poems

It is important to know what we are trying to do with our haiku, which usually is significantly different from conventional poetry. We’re talking about English-language haiku, and our examples will be mostly that. Still, haiku evolved from Japanese haiku, and we’ll need to touch on Japanese poetics and aesthetics as well.

The goal of haiku is to communicate. The means of communication has to be words, yet words are an inefficient, misleading, even meretricious vehicle for the conveyance of meaning. It would be wonderful if the haiku poet, like the graphic artist, could communicate images directly, without the medium of words, but of course that is not possible.

The careful choice and use of words is important in all kinds of writing—in fact that is practically a definition of poetry—but I would argue that the haiku poet is under a different pressure. Poets writing mainstream poetry select words for their intrinsic and resonant beauty. Haiku poets strive for precision of meaning and appropriateness of diction. Wordplay or any other use of a word that calls attention to the word itself or away from the meaning of the haiku is discouraged. Words must be used as gently as possible so as to minimize perturbations of the image. From this comes the idea that haiku is, or insofar as possible should be, a wordless poem.

### Using as Few Words as Possible

The observant reader will have noticed that haiku are shorter than conventional poems. In fact the haiku poet approaches the craft from a different direction than the conventional poet. He/she tries to describe a moment as succinctly and directly as possible. When poets set out to write haiku, they realize that the quota of words will be extremely limited so they impose on themselves constraints that conventional poets generally need not worry about.

The haiku poet should be aware of the danger of including an extra word or two by way of explanation, to add color to the poem or for any other reason. Here are some examples of haiku that I have seen in my editing work that I found less than ideally concise, followed by the version that was finally published or approved.

As the spring rains fall  
soaking in them, on the porch  
a child's rag doll

Spring rains  
soaking on the porch  
a child's rag doll<sup>1</sup>

my young child's  
schoolhouse  
toy soldiers  
at the doorway

schoolhouse  
toy soldiers  
at the doorway<sup>2</sup>

sidewalk at dusk  
a skateboard's clip-clop  
fading toward home

dusk  
the clip-clop of a skateboard  
fades<sup>3</sup>

Most of what was trimmed in these examples falls in the category of unnecessary information. “Spring rains” says everything necessary from the original, five-syllable first line. “Schoolhouse” already suggests young children, and that the child was the poet’s is neither here nor there to the reader. “Dusk” plus “fading” carry the suggestion of returning home, so the surrounding words can profitably be dropped.

A frequent problem, especially for beginners, is the bloating that occurs when the poet tries to pad out a verse to the 5–7–5 syllable structure that was—and still is by some—considered a norm. Here are two examples from early writers of haiku in America:

This brave plum tree shakes  
its fisty buds at retreating  
bullying winter<sup>4</sup>

Wrinkled summer pond:  
turtle sailing old brown log  
gulps pirate stone flies.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the bloat, caused mostly by the use of puffy descriptors—I call them “perfidious adjectives and adverbs”—both these haiku show other stigmata of having being stuffed into 5–7–5-syllable structure. The second especially suffers from “tontoism,” the dropping of small words—articles here—with the resulting stilted diction, and the introduction of words purely for their ornamental value.

### **Redundancy**

Haiku poets must be supremely aware of the full meaning of the words they select for their verses, both their denotation and connotation. It is easy to fall victim to cliché or otherwise include words in their haiku that are not necessary or distract from the essence of the verse.

A common problem is the “double *kigo*” (we’ll talk about *kigo* later, but for now a *kigo* is a word or phrase that connotes a specific season of the year and is one of the main devices the Japanese haiku poet can use to expand his poetic vocabulary). If you have “snow” in your haiku, mention of “winter” is redundant.

Here is a real before-and-after case where a second *kigo* was surgically removed without damaging the patient:

unraked leaves  
the first autumn  
without him

unraked leaves  
the first year  
without him<sup>6</sup>

Double *kigo* is more of a problem when dealing with (or imitating) Japanese haiku. For example, water birds and whales are both winter *kigo*, so to the Japanese these two published American haiku would be seasonally redundant or conflicting—or at least confusing:

toddler’s frown . . .  
winter ducks swim past  
her bread crumbs<sup>7</sup>

summer’s end  
at the high-water mark  
pilot whales<sup>8</sup>

Both these haiku are probably acceptable to the English-language readership for whom the nuances of seasonality are not of great concern. Still, I wonder if “winter” in the first haiku adds anything.

There are many other situations in which words unnecessarily overlap one another in connotation. A phrase such as “my pet dog” could probably do without “pet,” which aspect would likely be assumed. Likewise, “steep” in “steep cliffs” is probably unnecessary. In the following haiku it seemed to the poet that “old” was gratuitous, even a cliché, as we already receive a sense of age from “granddad,” “cracked,” and “coalbucket.”

granddad’s old coalbucket  
cracked at the handle—  
early autumn dusk

granddad’s coalbucket  
cracked at the handle—  
early autumn dusk<sup>9</sup>

In the following haiku, having “fingers” and “hands” in the same haiku troubled me. The version on the left was published, but the version on the right suggests that additional pruning might have served the poem well.

fingers still sticky  
from cotton candy  
we hold hands<sup>10</sup>

still sticky  
from cotton candy  
we hold hands

### Internal Inconsistency

Haiku poets can have a problem with internal inconsistency—using two expressions that contradict each other. One example that piques me is using a word such as “still” or “quiet” plus a mention of a noise or movement:

quiet woods—  
sound of an acorn falling  
through the tree<sup>11</sup>

old and quiet pond  
suddenly a frog plops in—  
a deep water sound<sup>12</sup>

Maybe in “quiet woods,” one could argue that “quiet” describes the general atmosphere that permits the hearing of a small sound such as an acorn dropping. The addition of “quiet” to the translations of Bashō’s “old pond” haiku, however, seems to muddy the waters a bit by using three words relating to sound (as well as adding three “perfidious” descriptors that are not in Bashō’s original: “quiet,” “suddenly,” and “deep”). The following haiku keeps me in the dark as to the state of illumination, and that very phrase seems eminently expendable:

No one lights a lamp.  
Just our voices in the dark  
as the night descends.<sup>13</sup>

### Choosing the Right Word

English is an amazingly rich language, and the poet almost always has available a range of word choices, allowing great precision and nuance.

## How Specific?—Tech Talk

What degree of precision is desirable and acceptable? In a wonderful essay in *Frogpond* 32:1 (Winter 2009), Paul Miller discusses specificity in terms of balance:

Poetry is a balancing act. As writers we are all misunderstood. That is fortunately(!) the nature of the short poem. Words are abstractions, so the less words we use, the more abstract and general our poems become—and more open to reader interpretation. And haiku are the least wordy poems! It is important to remember that each poem is two poems: the writer's and the reader's. As a writer I want to express my discovery in just enough words to lead the reader to discover what I did, but I don't want to tell them too much or they lose their discovery.

Riffing on Miller's idea, examine six variant first lines for a haiku of John Barlow's and see if you can determine which is the one he actually wrote. Lines two and three follow below. The meaning of the haiku shifts substantially with the changing first line.<sup>14</sup>

- a bird
- a long-tailed bird
- a passerine
- a warbler
- a whitethroat
- *Sylvia communis*

[ ... ]  
flits through the thicket ...  
late summer wind

Different choices make for different interpretations. "Bird" and even "long-tailed bird" are pretty general and don't evoke much of an image for me. "Passerine" is not a common word in English; it refers to perching songbirds. "Warbler" is more specific and better known. People can be expected to understand it. "Whitethroat" is a species native to Europe but not North America; presumably an ornithologically

challenged North American might discern that this is some kind of bird or butterfly but would likely have no idea of the creature or its habits. *Sylvia communis*, the Latin genus and species, would be known only to a scientist or a serious birder.

The consideration here is how the level of specificity relates to the rest of the haiku. Any bird might flit through the thicket. Does it really matter if it is a warbler, whitethroat, or any old bird? Maybe even a butterfly or a chipmunk? How specific does the word choice *need* to be?

Occasionally a slight shift in one word will make a haiku more universally understandable:

a county plow  
closes the driveway—  
April 15th

a county snowplow  
closes the driveway—  
April 15th<sup>15</sup>

In April “plow” would mean “snowplow” in Wisconsin, but perhaps an Arizonan might momentarily be puzzled.

Having found the right word, the poet needs to be sure to place it in the haiku where it receives appropriate emphasis. By zeroing in on the coming-out party and placing it first, in revisions this poet achieves desirable directness:

news  
of his coming out party  
the cacti in bloom

coming-out party  
the cacti in bloom<sup>16</sup>

### **High-falootin’ Talk**

Sometimes a haiku poet will choose words that are not in common use or that are more complicated or *recherché* than they need to be, such as these two that were submitted but not accepted for publication:

A capriccio  
Temple and Grand bumpers glare  
—Anagnorisis

smoking cessation  
a cigarette butt  
in the grackle’s nest

In such cases I always have the impression that the poet is trying to advertise that he/she knows more words than I do—i.e., showing off. Again, the point of writing a haiku is to communicate. If it does not do so because one word or another is unfamiliar, I have to adjudge a failed haiku. My tolerance for Googling or Merriam-Webstering is definitely limited.

### Pretty Talk

Some haiku poets believe they're writing conventional poetry and choose words that are intended to make their poem lyrical or pretty. Oftentimes a single image is decorated in such a way that it may pass itself off as more than one image. James Hackett does this. The first of these two haiku of his is really a statement with one heavily decorated image. The second has two images, but their focus and meaning are, I feel, subverted by the wordplay:

Made impregnable by squadrons of bumblebees: this clovered coolness. <sup>17</sup>	The censored souk echoes my 'coughing Zen' . . . asthma in Islam <sup>18</sup>
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Here are two unpublished submissions that to me seem to be mostly about poetry, pretty images, and wordplay:

louring clouds a Spode dish of pills on a silver tray	plangent loons I find moonlight in the room
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I had to Google “louring” only to learn that it is a rare usage. I thought it might be an allusion of some sort, but couldn't find anything. What would be the effect on the haiku by using “lowering clouds” or “low clouds”? And in the second line maybe “Meissen” or “Quimper” instead of “Spode”? “Plangent loons” seems to me an exercise in the sound of the words, especially the rhymes and assonance. For me, the sound of a haiku is a consideration, but definitely a secondary one. I believe haiku are made for the eye not the ear.



## Invented Words

A haiku poet with a poetic bent may even find that the available lexicon is inadequate to support his/her feelings of lyricism. Consider the invention of portmanteau words such as Elizabeth Searle Lamb's "nightdark":

into the deepest of the nightdark    the talking drums<sup>19</sup>

Certainly a descriptive and lovely image, but is it too-too poetic for haiku? Anne McKay was especially noted for her gorgeous haiku-like poems and inventive use of language, for example:

dreams under umbrellas  
in the rainvalley  
raindreams<sup>20</sup>

torn lace  
and tincan geraniums  
on sills of secondstory rooms

face<sup>21</sup>                      a bonnard

In addition to inventing new words, poets today manipulate text and use concrete-poetry techniques to push the meaning of their words well beyond even lyricism. Such is the case with classic poems such as Cor van den Heuvel's single-word "tundra"<sup>22</sup> or Nick Virgilio's compressed "fossilence."<sup>23</sup> Or with visual poems such as:<sup>24</sup>

i  
niche  
o  
n

For my money, all of these devices raise the flag that we warned against at the outset: words that call attention to themselves divert attention from the meaning of the haiku itself. If, as Bashō taught, you point at the moon with a bejeweled finger you won't notice the moon.

## Specificity and the Haiku Persona

The haiku poet will often omit the “small” words in the pursuit of brevity and conciseness (see tontoism earlier). When this involves personal pronouns, however, necessary specificity may be lost. For instance, the poet must decide whether or not to include a persona in the haiku—and how. It has long been fashionable to use present participles—the “-ing” form, sometimes mistakenly called gerunds—rather than full verbs. This probably reflects the fact that Japanese typically does not use personal pronouns and the doer is understood from the context. To Westerners it sounds as if “[somebody or other] drinks” or “traveling [is done by someone].” In English, however, a full-fledged subject and verb is usually more meaningful. Compare these variant pairs, published versions on the right:

autumn wind:  
giving my red heels  
away

autumn wind:  
I give my red heels  
away<sup>25</sup>

Valentine’s night—  
breaking up  
the chocolate heart

Valentine’s night  
we break up  
the chocolate heart<sup>26</sup>

In addition to bypassing the indefinite antecedent problem (“the autumn wind giving my shoes away”), the addition of specific persona through an active verb strengthens these verses immeasurably.

Having a personal pronoun in a haiku is not the same thing as having an ego-centered haiku. Haiku are usually expected to be objective and egoless, but if the poet becomes the focus of the haiku, the necessary objectivity is lost.

on a dirt road  
I notice an approaching  
cloud of dust

This haiku was submitted to *Modern Haiku* but not published for that reason. “I notice” seemed both gratuitous and injurious, putting the poet at the focal point.

## Making the Words You Choose More Meaningful

Haiku use words to convey images. The choice of just the right word is essential. But we have pointed out that an image or an emotion can only be inadequately expressed by words. What can a poet do when available words are insufficient? One fundamental technique is to have key words refer to some outside thing by means of an allusion of one sort or another. That is, using a certain word can evoke in the reader's mind another thing of philosophical, literary, cultural, or historical significance that is not itself directly mentioned in the haiku.

*Kigo* (season words) and *utamakura* (place references) are standard Japanese techniques for external allusion and can be adapted for English-language haiku. Western poetic devices such as conventional metaphor, simile, hyperbole, and personification can be viewed as internal allusions (i.e., both the target and source image are contained within the haiku), but these are generally held in low regard by serious haikuists. Still, many poets employ conventional metaphor and simile, and open-ended comparison or metaphor—what Paul O. Williams called “unresolved metaphor”—is the English-language-haiku version of the product of the Japanese *kire* (cutting or caesura to divide in two and qualify the impact of the phrases of a haiku).

### *Kigo*

*Kigo*, or season words, are the basic poetic device in Japanese haiku, one of the two or three indispensable aspects. Japanese poets use *kigo* as a device to link their haiku not only to a precise time of the year but also as a literary allusion by means of which their haiku is added to the collective weight of all other haiku and other poetry written over the centuries. We really have nothing like *kigo* in Western poetry.

A famous example of *kigo* as “vertical” or historical axis of Japanese haiku is Bashō's:

over an entire field  
they have planted rice—before  
I part with the willow<sup>27</sup>

This haiku refers also to a certain willow tree at Ashino village at which the poet Saigyō had composed a famous *waka* some 500 years earlier. “Willow” is an early spring *kigo*. Bashō visited the willow in the summer, however, as revealed by the reference to planted rice.

The application of *kigo* in English-language haiku is problematical. Many American haiku poets persist in using season words, but the function is perforce different and often seems an idle formality:

clothesline—  
from a shirt sleeve  
a cicada sings<sup>28</sup>

The cicada (late summer *kigo* in Japan) might be the subject of the haiku from New Zealand but does not seem to have been included to add a seasonal dimension or allusion to the poem. Similarly, in the following haiku the first line seems to be a “date stamp,” quite unnecessary in the company of two other winter season words.

winter wind  
colder in prison  
frost radiates on my window<sup>29</sup>

### *Utamakura*

A similar device used in Japanese haiku to extend meaning is *utamakura*, or making reference to historical places or events to broaden the significance of the bare words in a haiku and open a nest of associations. Bashō used *utamakura* all the time, especially in his travel diaries. This is a valuable tool too for English-language haikuists and could be employed even more widely. Here are two examples of references to places replete with meaning for all Americans:

False spring  
snow  
where Custer last stood<sup>30</sup>

Where the Twin Towers stood

Harvest Moon.<sup>31</sup>

And one more, a prizewinner in 2007, that uses the *kigo* “summer grass,” familiar from Bashō as well as the place reference in the first line to the vast herds of buffalo that formerly roamed the Great Plains:

buffalo bones  
a wind less than a whisper  
in the summer grass<sup>32</sup>

What might be called haiku of place is somewhat different than *utamakura*. Poets who use haiku for journaling and pay close attention to the time and place a haiku is composed, might mention a specific place of significance to them, as Gary Hotham has done in:

rocks  
in the ocean’s way  
—————  
Schoodic Point<sup>33</sup>

This is a brilliant evocation of the pounding surf in Acadia National Park, but Hotham does not seem to be trying to tap into a collective image as much as record his own awe at the scene. The 2009 Haiku Society of America members’ anthology featured haiku of place, some, like this one, getting really close to *utamakura*:

Trail of Tears  
a soft rain falls  
on my cheeks<sup>34</sup>

In these cases, we can see poets reaching for meaning beyond the naked words of their haiku by using place names to stimulate collective memories and emotions.

### Literary Reference

Japanese and English-language poets alike are fond of alluding to canonical works of literature in order to link their nascent verse with the wisdom and perceptions of the ancients. We

saw how Bashō often made obeisance to Saigyō, while there have been countless English-language allusions to Bashō’s “old pond” haiku. Here are more citations/parodies (on the right) of two of Bashō’s and one of Issa’s poems:

Lonely silence,  
a single cicada’s cry  
sinking into stone<sup>35</sup>

the silence.  
a bee is singing  
right into rock<sup>36</sup>

summer grasses—  
traces of dreams  
of ancient warriors<sup>37</sup>

army blankets—  
traces of the warriors’  
wet dreams<sup>38</sup>

The man pulling radishes  
pointed my way  
with a radish.<sup>39</sup>

farmer pointing the way  
with a shotgun<sup>40</sup>

More and more we’re seeing haiku poets use allusions to canonical Western literature to expand the meaning of their work. Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Métro” is one frequent referent, as are Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at A Blackbird,” and William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow.” For example:

Wet petals  
against a black bough—  
and my up-turned face.<sup>41</sup>

An apparition  
in the crowd of white petals  
the wet black bough<sup>42</sup>

the fourteenth way

a black bird on this black bough  
sings a reckoning, though none may.<sup>43</sup>

nothing  
depends on  
this hyacinth blooming<sup>44</sup>

small town Fourth  
so much depends  
on the fireflies<sup>45</sup>

American classics are popular targets for allusion too, such as Longfellow’s “The Village Blacksmith” and Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”:

under the spreading  
chestnut tree, two children  
playing gameboys<sup>46</sup>

overtaken  
by weeds—  
the road not taken<sup>47</sup>

Phrases from the Bible and Shakespeare are, of course, rife in haiku. Two examples:

Through a glass clearly:                      columbine, by any other name<sup>49</sup>  
    a sparrow waging battle  
    with his reflection.<sup>48</sup>

In *Simply Haiku* 3:3 (Autumn 2005), Susumu Takiguchi did a series of haiku on the subject of death and employing literary references to, among others, The Revelation of Saint John the Divine and John Donne's Devotions. "Earth Day: Variations with Theme," a sequence by Geraldine Clinton Little, featured a refrain repeated, like a tolling bell, at the end of each rhymed haiku. It probably alludes to the Donne line, "Ask not for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee":

sundawn  
a flutter of mourning doves,  
& poised, light-bathed, one faun  
nearby, a bell tolls changes<sup>50</sup>

Robert Spiess famously published a series of senryu in the style of Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* called "Tall River Junction."<sup>51</sup> Spiess's descriptions of the residents of that fictitious town are not quite a parody of Masters, but almost.

Writing with allusions has its pitfalls, as when the reference proves too obscure for your target audience. For example, the following reference is okay for me, but might be just over the line for people of a younger generation:

tugboats moored  
to the Marseilles dock—  
the Gertrude, the Alice B.<sup>52</sup>

These two would miss me entirely if they hadn't been patiently explained:

New Year's Eve bath—  
I fail to become  
a swan<sup>53</sup>

day moon  
the only living boy  
in Chicago<sup>54</sup>

Fay Aoyagi's haiku, on the left, refers to another by Sumio Mori, well known in Japan, in which his wife is bathing on New Year's Eve and reminds him of a swan. Christopher Patchel's haiku, on the right, refers to Simon & Garfunkel's 1970 song, "The Only Living Boy in New York."

### Internal Allusion

The discussion above concerns *external* allusion, in which the source image is contained within the haiku but the referent is external to it. There are many devices in both Japanese- and English-language haiku that can extend the meaning of words even using *internal* referents, that is, metaphor—especially unresolved metaphor—and other referents that are contained within the haiku.

Because good haiku in any language rely for their effect on the technique of *cutting* (*kire* in Japanese), which causes the juxtaposition of the images for the purposes of internal comparison, it is important that, first, there be two images, and second, that they be in some manner comparable. The left-hand version here was the original and the one that was published, but I would have liked to sharpen the two images as on the right:

smell of asphalt  
tells of summer's  
beginning

asphalt smell  
the start  
of summer<sup>55</sup>

The following haiku as submitted seemed to me to lack a well-articulated second image, leaving the potential of the haiku unrealized. The author came up with "evening primrose," a plant that is native to her area, and an image that seemed to add a fine dimension to the haiku.



through open range  
the blackened windows  
of a prison bus

evening primrose  
the blackened windows  
of a prison bus<sup>56</sup>

Not many haiku are written these days that use metaphor or simile as blatantly as did Carrow De Vries and Etheridge Knight, respectively:

Mock orange is snow,  
ruby-throated hummingbird  
sledding over it.<sup>57</sup>

Eastern guard tower  
glints in sunset; convicts rest  
like lizards on rocks.<sup>58</sup>

The objection haikuists have to such work is that, in an attempt to broaden the meaning of an image, it is presented as something that it is not: mock orange is not really snow and convicts are not lizards. The haiku principle of objectivity is violated.

### **Internal Comparison: *Kire***

The technique of cutting—*kire*—in order to promote internal comparison of images or phrases, basic and essential to haiku, is itself a sort of metaphor. The reader is given two things—images or phrases—and challenged to compare or contrast them. The poet is saying in essence, “I see some meaning beyond the obvious in Image A; the essence can be expressed as Image B; can you see the connection?” Not exactly saying A = B (metaphor) or A is like B (simile) but as a suggested, or unresolved, metaphor. In both “asphalt smell” and “evening primrose,” by defining the cut between the two images the vital element of internal comparison in the haiku is enhanced.

More or less appropriate to haiku—but frequently used—are other Western poetic devices such as synecdoche (the representation of the whole by a single part) and zeugma (a word modifying other words in a different way).

a new blue shirt  
leaves this solitary house  
to go wife hunting<sup>59</sup>

Running  
across the meadow . . .  
stream and six-year-old.<sup>60</sup>

Clearly, James Tipton's blue shirt is to be understood as something much larger—i.e., himself—while in the second haiku the meaning of the word “running” is amplified by its application to both the stream and the child.

Similar to zeugma are devices in which a descriptive word for one image is mentally extended by the reader to the second image. I call this transference, as in Carol Montgomery's senryu,

honeymooners  
. . . fondling  
their menus<sup>61</sup>

Sometimes in cases like this the haiku poet wants to amplify the meaning of his/her words but in a misleading, nebulous, or ambiguous way, perhaps to increase the challenge to the reader in decoding the poem. Because such techniques sully the notion that haiku is a mode of communication, I'm not sure that deliberate ambiguity is always desirable, but it is certainly now a trend in English-language haiku composition. The following haiku won a top spot in the Shiki Internet Kukai and was picked up for the Red Moon Anthology:

moon in the lilies  
she asks me  
to stay the night<sup>62</sup>

so clearly not everyone was worried about the indefinite “she” in line two. Knowing that the poet is a woman didn't solve much for me, however, as I still wrestle with whether “she” is a mother, daughter, sister, lover—or who exactly. I sort of like the ambiguity, but more than one of my editorial colleagues finds this sort of puzzle in haiku off-putting.

Another, more telling case is the following famous verse. By itself and without any context this haiku would be unintelligible to 99% of readers:

cockscombs  
there must be 14 or 15<sup>63</sup>

If you know that the poet was Shiki—and if you know who Shiki was and that he was bedridden and immobilized by painful spinal tuberculosis for the last several years of his life—the haiku perhaps begins to make some sense. You can visualize the invalid pulling himself up to the window with excruciating difficulty to check the state of his garden.

Misdirection is a mainstay of senryu, of course. The first part of the poem sets the mind going in one direction and the second part comes as a complete surprise, usually humorously—the “aha! moment” writ large:

nude beach  
his enormous  
sand castle<sup>64</sup>

This kind of disjunction, especially Jim Kacian’s haiku

my fingerprints  
on the dragonfly  
in amber<sup>65</sup>

has been much discussed in the literature in recent years. Here the reader is misdirected to puzzle over how fingerprints can be found on a dragonfly. Haiku critic Richard Gilbert has identified dozens of types of disjunction that are used in haiku to cause a jump in meaning and, one hopes, an expansion of the meaning of the words of the haiku.<sup>66</sup>

### Afterword

To recap, words are the key building stones of haiku. In choosing words for a haiku the poet faces three basic tasks: first, to choose as few words as possible—only those that are absolutely necessary; second, to select just the right word with the right meaning; and third, where necessary, to expand the meaning of the words through connotations and tropes. Skill in haiku diction comes through reading and study, and in the doing.

## Notes

1. Steven E. Cottingham in *Modern Haiku* 38:1 (Winter–Spring 2007).
2. Tony A. Thompson in *Modern Haiku* 38:3 (Autumn 2007).
3. Not published.
4. Frank Ankenbrand, Jr., in *American Haiku* 1:1 (1963).
5. Truth Mary Fowler in *American Haiku* 5:1 (1967).
6. Aurora Antonovic in *Modern Haiku* 38:3 (Autumn 2007).
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