

Down East Haiku

from *A Field Guide to North American Haiku*¹

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Haiku are nature poems. What better place to study nature haiku than the U.S. state of Maine? This installment of the Field Guide departs from our usual format in that we are not considering season words (snow, butterflies, etc.) or haiku topics (season, landscape, animals, etc.) but rather what we might call “haiku of place.” The place in the current case is the U.S. state of Maine.

The two most prominent Maine haikuists are probably Bruce Ross and Paul MacNeil, both of them “from away” (not natives) as they say in Maine. Born in Hamilton, Ont., Ross taught literature the University of Maine and several places out of state before returning to Maine with his wife, Astrid Andreescu, also a haiku poet, a few years ago. They live in Bangor, where Ross runs Tancho Press, whose first publication was *A Scent of Pine, A Maine Haiku Anthology* (2011). Ross also founded the Bangor Haiku Group, believed to be the only active haiku group in the state.

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 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 *saijiki* (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. The haiku are selected from my Haiku Database, currently containing more than 416,000 haiku. This current chapter of *Field Guide* presents haiku of or about Maine; the total number of haiku in the Database tagged “Maine” is about 300. 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 trumbull@comcast.net.

MacNeil's mother also hailed from Bangor and, though Paul was born in Massachusetts and lives now mostly in Ocala, Fla., he spends the summer months at a camp on Lake Onawa in Monson, Maine, where he invites fellow poets to visit for R & R (relaxation & renku). Other Maine residents include Anne LB Davidson, who came from New York and now resides in Saco; British-born Kirsty Karkow, who retired to Waldoboro; and Tyler Pruett who lives in Augusta. Adam Traynor resides in Portland and Lynda True in Cape Neddick.

Natives of Maine include Marjorie Bates Pratt (born in Waterville), Cor van den Heuvel (Biddeford), Arizona Zipper (the White Mountains, now living in Fryeburg), and Catherine J.S. Lee (Eastport). Other haikuists born in Maine but now living elsewhere include Gary Hotham (born in Presque Isle), Robert Henry Poulin (Waterville), Gary LeBel (Bath), Dan McCullough (Old Orchard Beach), and Karina M. Young (Augusta). The work these haikuists do, however, is typically not specific to Maine.

Jim Kacian and William M. Ramsey both attended Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, where they probably took classes from John Tagliabue, a poet who had haiku published in *American Haiku*, in the 1960s. Edward J. Rielly, a transplant from Wisconsin, teaches at Saint Joseph's College of Maine in Standish, as does Brenda Bechtel. Temporary or seasonal residents of Maine have included H. F. Noyes, who worked summers on a farm as a young lad, Michael Ketchek, Sally Biggar, who lived in a Zen community on the coast. Native American writer Barbara Robidoux lived on a reservation in Maine. Margaret Molarsky enjoyed sailing off the Maine coast.

Among haiku events held in Maine have been the "Jazz-ku," a jazz renku performed by Arizona Zipper and Raffael de Gruttola at the Deer Tree Summer Theatre in Harrison in the summer of 1999. The Japan America Society of Maine organizes several festivals a year, and in 2015 they cosponsored, with the Mid-Coast Friends of Haiku, a "Haiku Ginko" at the private, Japanese-style Schleppeinghurst Garden in Lincolnville.

In 2018 Heather van Dam (poems) and Alahna Roach (ink paintings) published their compilation, *Blueberry Moon* which traffics through locales around Maine, while Sarah M. Strong, a former college teacher of Japanese who lives in central Maine, started a blog, *A Maine Haiku Almanac*² to feature her own 5-7-5 haiku, few of which, however, are identifiable as being from or about Maine.

The most direct means of indicating a specific location is, of course, to name it. In classical Japanese haiku and other genres, poets used *utamakura* (歌枕), the naming of a place or thing that would evoke a feeling of significance or resonance in the reader. Wikipedia³ defines this rhetorical device as follows:

Utamakura is a category of poetic words, often involving place names, that allow for greater allusions and intertextuality across Japanese poems.

Utamakura includes locations familiar to the court of ancient Japan, such as

- particularly sacred Shinto and Buddhist sites,
- places where historic events occurred, and
- places that trigger a separate mental association through a pun.

Classical *haijin* used place names and references frequently. Perhaps the most famous is Bashō's Sado Island haiku:

Wild seas!
Stretching across to Sado
The Milky Way.
*trans. Ichikawa Sanki et al.,
Haikai and Haiku (1958)*

² <https://mainehaiku.almanac.wordpress.com>.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utamakura>.

From medieval times, remote Sado Island, off the coast of Niigata province, was a place where dissidents and other politically inconvenient persons were banished. Thus, the very mention of the place would evoke images of extreme hardship and suffering and adds great depth to Bashō's haiku.

Two more contemporary examples of *utamakura* refer to sites of notable disasters. The first,

神田大火
陽炎や三千軒の家のあと

Kanda taika
kagerō ya sanzen gen no ie no ato

The Great Fire of Kanda

Heat-waves,
From the remains
Of three thousand houses.

Shiki, trans. R. H. Blyth, Haiku 2

and another from Ishihara Yatsuka, which may contain echoes of Shiki's Great Fire:

原爆地子が陽炎に消えゆけり
genbaku-chi ko ga kagerō ni kieyukeri

The atomic bomb site: a child disappears in heat haze
*trans. Hiroaki Sato, Haiku Society of America, ed.,
Haiku Selected for Shikishi (1978)*

Utamakura has parallels in Western poetry as well. The Wikipedia article, for example, cites the adjective "stygian," a reference to the River Styx, the boundary between Earth and

the Underworld. Further, “California,” which Wikipedia says is “a common reference for artists in that it invokes thoughts of excess, splendor, wealth, and a sense of fakeness in body and spirit.” Other particularly resonant place names from American history could include “Gettysburg,” “Wounded Knee,” and “Walden,” as well as geographical synecdoche (where one part of a thing is used to represent the whole) such as “Broadway” and “Tin Pan Alley” (the theater and popular music enterprises centered in New York City), and “Washington” (signifying the U.S. political and governmental apparatus).

Sometimes haikuists use place names in their haiku too—but not very often in the case of Maine. For example, while “Maine” is mentioned relatively frequently, I have not found any cases in which idyllic names like “Acadia,” “Bar Harbor,” “Kennebunk,” “Kennebec,” “Androscoggin,” or “Allagash” are used. Here are some of the very few cases in which a Maine location evokes or suggests clear images or emotions:

Cadillac Mountain
seeing as far as you can
and them some

*Robert J. Seretny, in Joseph Kirschner, Lidia Rozmus,
and Charles Trumbull, eds., A Travel-worn Satchel
(HSA Members' Anthology 2009)*

Katahdin
my dream exposed
on the knife edge

*Tom Painting, Shiki Internet Kukai, July 2010
(free-format section, theme: anything quirky)*

shaped water
out beyond and beyond—
downeast Maine

Madeleine Findlay, Shaped Water (2007)

I would argue that “Maine” is essential in F. Michael Blaine’s haiku to make clear why spring onions are for sale in August:

Maine farmer’s market
kinds of spring onions—
in late august

*F. Matthew Blaine, Modern Haiku 34:3
(autumn 2003), 10*

Most often, though, *utamakura* is not the rationale for a haiku poet mentioning a place. I’m sure we have all written what we might dub “Kilroy-was-here” haiku, that is, poems stating a location that the poet has visited but which does not have any special meaning or resonance beyond that fact (or maybe containing a very personal memory that would probably not be understood by the general reader). I wrote such a haiku this last summer at Wells Beach, Maine, the one on the left:

Wells Beach—
five heartbeats
to each wave

autumn shore
five heartbeats
to each wave

Realizing that the first line added nothing but a “place stamp,” I changed the haiku to the version on the right.

I think the following haiku might also be placed in the “non-*utamakura*” category:

Running the Maine Coast
7.3 miles round Cape Crozier
my pounding heart

*Ben Pleasants, from a sequence “Runner’s Haiku,”
Frogpond 11:3 (August 1988)*

autumn leaves
halfway up Barren Mountain
red and orange

Yu Chang, in Paul MacNeil, ed., Onawa Poems (2009)

buoys glint, clang:
brackish wind sweeps broken tones
across Blue Hill Bay

J. P. Trammell, Modern Haiku 24:2 (summer 1993)

Old Orchard Beach
before I could think it
Cassiopeia

Bruce Ross, The Heron's Nest 12:1 (March 2010)

rocks
in the ocean's way

————
Schoodic Point

Gary Hotham, Whirligig 2:2 (November 2011)

On sitting beside Damariscotta Lake on a mild March
morning, gazing out over the vast expanse of water
sheathed in ice 2 feet thick

a slow gentleness
ice remembering water
surrendering form

Elizabeth W. Garber,

Pierced by the Seasons (2001)

Another world-famous Maine landmark is L.L. Bean, the
retail outfitter based in Freeport:

first Christmas card
of the year:
L.L. Bean

*Tom Clausen, Hawai'i Education Association Contest
1996 (Humorous), 2nd Place*

a slow gentleness
ice remembering water
surrendering form

Elizabeth W. Garber, Pierced by the Seasons (2001)

I'm not sure that "Maine apple pie" is all that different from apple pie elsewhere, but Robert Henry Poulin's unpublished haiku about his grandmother's version is certainly evocative of time and place:

cast iron stove:
Maine apple pie
and grandma's song

Apart from direct mention of places, we might posit that certain words are often—though certainly not always—associated with Maine. The state abounds with animal life. The state bird is the black-capped chickadee, though the animals most closely identified with the state would surely be the loon, the lobster, the moose, and, of course, black flies:

faded lilacs
a black-capped chickadee
sings from branch to branch

Jim Benz, Daily Haiku, July 3, 2010

nearly December—
seed by seed the chickadees
empty the feeder

Anne LB Davidson, Acorn 5 (fall 2000)

last night
a branch swaying
long after the chickadee left

paul m., in Onawa Poems (2009)

autumn stillness
the approach
of chickadees

Paul MacNeil, in The Onawa Poems (2009)

mountain stillness—
the loon call
held by the lake

Hilary Tann, The Heron's Nest 8:4 (December 2006)

an old tree split
right through the heart
first loon song

Ferris Gilli, Acorn 11 (fall 2003)

Perseid meteor
one loon call
starts another

Paul MacNeil, in The Onawa Poems (2009), 8

autumn wind
through the lobster pots
a giant moon

Frank K. Robinson, Frogpond 4:3 (1981), 23

storm clouds
the distant buoy
of a lobster pot

Kay Grimnes, Simply Haiku 2:2 (March/April 2004)

autumn's rough seas—
lobstermen move their traps
to deeper water

*Patricia Neubauer, New Zealand International
Contest (1998), 1st Place*

a seafood restaurant
Christmas lights
in a lobster trap

Cor van den Heuvel, Where Am I Going? (2008)

salt marsh
a moose lifts antlers
dripping with weeds

Kirsty Karkow, Shorelines (2007)

heading up
guest-cabin path—
moose tracks

Paul MacNeil, Haiku Light (February 1998)

tiny bubbles
where the moose was
a cluster of flies

Yu Chang, The Heron's Nest 3:4 (April 2001)

the Maine woods
my calendar set
by black flies

Jeff Hoagland, Bottle Rockets 26 (2012), 37

solstice celebration—
a feast day
among mosquitos

John Stevenson, in The Onawa Poems (2009)

Maine's nickname is The Pine Tree State, and to be sure, pines figure in any Maine haiku. Caution is advised, however, as most

states have some kind of pine growing within its borders. The following are “Maine haiku” by dint of the author’s Down East ties if nothing else:

pine scent
wild geese go honking north
over Katahdin

*Cor van den Heuvel, from the sequence “North Over
Katahdin,” Modern Haiku 45:1 (winter–spring 2014)*

tomorrow I leave
cones high
in the old pine

paul m., The Heron’s Nest 8:1 (March 2006)

In the same vein, images and Maine words such as “rocky coastline,” “rocks” in general, “pond” (i.e., what we would call a lake in New Mexico !), “lighthouse,” “camp” (which can be as grand as a summer cottage), “the Maine woods,” “snow,” and even the historic “Route 1” are common, whether in Maine haiku or not:

end of a Maine day
rocks too big to sink
into the ocean

Gary Hotham, Otata 11 (November 2016)

Maine—
granite poking up
through the lawn

Paul Watsky, The Heron’s Nest 4:4 (April 2002)

summer camp—
studying other people's
collections of stones

Hilary Tann, The Heron's Nest 4:11 (November 2002)

night sea ...
every six seconds
the lighthouse

Dan McCullough, Acorn 11 (fall 2003)

Abandoned lighthouse
curling in the postcard rack
of the tourist shop

*Neil Megaw, from the sequence "Christmas Cove,
Maine," Modern Haiku 18:3 (autumn 1987)*

dusk on the pond
the yodeling call
of a single loon

*Gloria H. Procsal, from the sequence "Bryant Pond,
Maine," Frogpond 9:3 (August 1986)*

deep woods
a sapling with one leaf
changes color

*paul m., The Heron's Nest 8:4 (December 2006),
Editors' Choice*

the light inside the snow
disappearing
disappearing

*Mark Rutter, from the haibun "Maine Journal,"
Haiku Scotland 12 [2007]*

boxes of cherries
on the roadside stand
sunset on Route 1

*Cor van den Heuvel, from the sequence "North Over
Katahdin," Modern Haiku 45:1 (winter–spring 2014)*

So, some haiku just *sound* Maine and some things *look* Maine;
you'll know them when you see them:

out-of-state plate—
thinking I can see
Maine in his face

*Makiko [Jim Kacian], Modern Haiku 23:1
(winter–spring 1992)*