

Haiku Poet Interviews: Shloka Shankar

Questions Provided by Jacob D. Salzer

Country of Residence: India

Website: shlokashankar.com

Education: Master's degree in English Language & Literature

Interests and Hobbies: Digital art, abstract & geometric art, collage & visual poems, editing, teaching, singing

Haiku Volunteer Positions and Affiliations:

1. Founding Editor of the literary & arts journal *Sonic Boom*
2. Founding Editor of Yavanika Press, an independent publisher of e-chapbooks
3. Served as a panelist for the Touchstone Individual Poems Award 2023
4. Co-founder of the Trailblazer Contest
5. Conducted poetry workshops on several platforms such as Studio Ikigai, LearnShare, BitClass, Off Topic Publishing (Canada), Lampshade Writers, and The Writers' Room for Poets series by Authors Publish
6. Facilitated special workshops for educational institutions in India, such as Dr. BMN College of Home Science, Mumbai; Pravin Gandhi College of Law, Mumbai; the Chennai Mathematical Institute, Chennai; Chatrabhuj Narsee School, Mumbai; and IIT Bombay

Journal Publications: Shloka Shankar's poems and artwork have appeared in over 200 online and print venues of repute.

Book Publications:

Points of Arrival (Origami Poems Project, 2021)

The Field of Why (Yavanika Press, 2022)

living in the pause (Yavanika Press, 2024)

Selected Awards and Honorable Mentions:

Best of the Net nominee

Pushcart Prize nominee

where the roots are: Best of Paper Lanterns, Vol. 2 (Yavanika Press, 2021), received an Honourable Mention in the Touchstone Distinguished Books Awards for 2021

The Field of Why (Yavanika Press, 2022) was shortlisted for the Touchstone Distinguished Books Awards for 2022

Anthologies: Shloka has edited and co-edited over half a dozen international poetry anthologies since 2016, including *naad anunaad: an anthology of contemporary world haiku* (Vishwakarma Publications, 2016), *The 2020 Poetry Marathon Anthology* (Authors Publish, 2020), *where the roots are: Best of Paper Lanterns, Vol. 2* (Yavanika Press, 2021), *any moment now: the bric-à-brac poets anthology* (Yavanika Press, 2023), and *living in the pause* (Yavanika Press, 2024).

Other Features:

Shloka Shankar was featured in the *Hindustan Times* and *The Hindu Metroplus*.

You have a Master's degree in English Literature. What books and authors stood out to you the most during your college studies? What authors inspired you the most?

I had the privilege of getting a taste of Advanced English in my last two years of high school before pursuing both a Bachelor's and Master's degree in English Language and Literature from Madras Christian College, India. I particularly enjoyed studying Shakespeare, the Metaphysical poets, T. S. Eliot, the Indian English poets Nissim Ezekiel, R. Parthasarathy, and A. K. Ramanujan, and Dostoevsky as part of our paper on European literature. I also immensely enjoyed the plays we studied as part of American literature, including works by Sam Shepard, Eugene O'Neill, and Tennessee Williams. I was most inspired by Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Sylvia Plath, Camus, Beckett, Alan Bennett, Noël Coward, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Elkunchwar, and others as a student.

Who are some of your favorite visual artists?

I do not have a formal education in art history. Most of what I know has stemmed from watching a handful of phenomenal contemporary abstract artists on YouTube or by taking workshops with artists like Louise Fletcher, Nicholas Wilton, Adele Sypesteyn, Chris Loud, Denise Love, Andrea Cermanski, Froyle Davis, and Jan Davies, along with my own experiments in digital art. As far as art movements are concerned, I'm drawn to Cubism, American Abstract Expressionism, and Minimalism.

Who are some of your favorite writers/poets who have inspired and influenced you the most in your creative work?

I began writing angst-ridden free verse during my final year of college but stopped soon after discovering haiku a few years later. Nevertheless, I continue to be inspired by Nissim Ezekiel, Eunice D'Souza, Billy Collins, Ron Padgett, Mary Oliver, John Levy, Mary Ruefle, Kim Addonizio, Stephen Dunn, and Arundhati

Subramanian, among others. The haiku poets I admire include: Kat Lehmann, Robin Smith, Alan Summers, Richa Sharma, Johannes S. H. Bjerg, Marianne Paul, Peter Jastermsky, Michael Rehling, Philip Rowland, Debbie Strange, Melissa Allen, Cherie Hunter Day, Scott Metz, Jim Kacian, Surashree Joshi, Rashmi VeSa, Raghav Prashant Sundar, Jonathan Humphrey, R. C. Thomas, Stephen Toft, Pat Nelson, Pat Davis, Michael Nickels-Wisdom, Kati Mohr, John Pappas, Joseph Aversano Salvatore, and several others.

When and how were you introduced to haiku and Japanese-related poetry?

I was introduced to INhaiku by Kash Poet in early 2014, a closed workshopping group on Facebook founded by Kala Ramesh. Here, I encountered untitled, non-5-7-5 haiku for the first time. I began sharing my rudimentary attempts and received generous critiques from poets like Sanjuktaa Asopa, Arvinder Kaur, Angelee Deodhar, G. Akila, Geethanjali Rajan, Vinay Leo R., Raamesh Gowri Raghavan, and Paresh Tiwari.

Later, I joined Virtual Haiku, which opened an entirely new world of possibilities in Japanese short forms, thanks to veterans like Johannes S. H. Bjerg, Hansha Teki, Michael Rehling, Sheila Windsor, Brendan Slater, Terri L. French, Alan Summers, and others who were kind and welcoming of newcomers. I learned significantly by reading their poems and participating in insightful discussions.

What do you enjoy the most about haiku?

I am forever grateful for haiku entering my life when it did. It allowed me to join one of the most supportive and encouraging communities, forging lifelong friendships. Haiku, as a poetic form, has shown me the weight of each word and helped me strip away the fluff. It aids me in discovering and expressing my authentic self, which no other form has achieved for me. The greatest reward

is sharing the joy of crafting these tiny gems with others and witnessing how haiku transforms their poetic voices.

What do you enjoy the most about haiga?

The backbone of Japanese short-forms is juxtaposition, the quintessential “link and shift.” My foray into haiga began with photographs, but I soon developed my own style using digital abstracts. Collaborating with other poets and seeing their responses to my artwork is fascinating. For me, both the image and the poem must stand alone while creating an indescribable magic when paired together. This synergy heightens the overall piece, and that is what I love most about mixed-media/digital haiga. I published an anthology of 50 haiga earlier this year titled *living in the pause*, a collaboration with 13 poets spanning 2020 to 2024—a humbling and gratifying retrospective.

You teach an Introduction to Haiku workshop, which started during the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2021 and have taught 50+ students since then. What is the main outline for your 4-hour Introduction to Haiku course?

I have been running online poetry workshops through my brand bric-à-brac: the art & poetry shop since 2020, but the first haiku workshop was held during my birthday weekend in 2021. Initially, the course was spread over two consecutive weekends—on Day 1, I introduced participants to haiku and its primary facets, while Day 2 focused on senryu. I would then email a reading list, and we would reconvene the following weekend to workshop their initial attempts at the form. Several of my students went on to have their first-ever haiku published, which is, truly, a special feeling.

I eventually switched from the two-weekend model to a 4-hour course paired with a month-long mentorship, as most participants found it difficult to commit to the original format. The mentorship proved more effective because many of my students transitioned to

haiku after writing free verse, which requires some adjustment to the brevity and subtlety of the form. The updated 4-hour module is conducted over a single weekend, with two hours dedicated to haiku and two hours to senryu. I showcase a variety of styles and contemporary voices to provide a comprehensive introduction to these deceptively simple short forms.

You also offer a one-month mentorship after the haiku course. What are the main things you focus on as a mentor?

The mentorship program is held online on the second or third Sunday of each month. Students write a minimum of five poems—ranging from monoku to dua, haiga, haibun, and cherita—and we workshop them together as a group. This collaborative environment fosters detailed analysis and constructive feedback on each other's work. I also encourage students to maintain an inspiration file by reading current issues of various journals that publish haiku and related forms.

Additionally, I offer one-on-one sessions to delve deeper into specific concepts or submission strategies. Witnessing my students' growth and celebrating their achievements brings me immense satisfaction.

You are the founding editor of the literary & arts journal *Sonic Boom*, which started in 2014. This journal includes short poems and art. What initially inspired you to start this journal?

I was just over 10 months old in haiku years when I felt a strong urge to create a journal showcasing a variety of forms, including poetry, Japanese short forms, prose, and visual art. At that time, a decade ago, mainstream journals rarely published haiku and its allied forms. I wanted to spotlight original, thought-provoking, and experimental work.

After publishing 24 issues and three Best Of anthologies, the journal went on hiatus to allow for restructuring. We are excited to resume publication in January 2025 with a mix of new and returning team members. This new chapter holds great promise, and we look forward to reviewing and sharing even more explosive work.

You are the author of *The Field of Why*, a collection of haiku and haiga, which was shortlisted for the Touchstone Distinguished Book Award in 2022. What inspired you to write this book? What are the main themes that are found in your poems and haiga in this collection?

The Field of Why is my debut full-length collection of 51 poems spanning nearly a decade. It explores themes such as identity, belonging, language, relationships, and my disability, among others. The book was a long time in the making, undergoing half a dozen iterations before it took its final shape. Divided into four untitled sections, the narrative arc highlights my journey through inner and outer landscapes, weaving together the personal and the universal.

What haiku/writing projects do you have in mind for the future?

I am currently working on my second collection of haiku and senryu, which is slated for release in the fall of 2025. As mentioned earlier, I'm excited to relaunch *Sonic Boom* in its new avatar. I also aim to host online open mics for poetry next year, including Japanese short forms, to create more opportunities for poets—both budding and experienced—to share their work and exchange ideas. And, someday, in the distant future, I may start a poetry-centered podcast.

Shloka Shankar is a poet, editor, and self-taught visual artist from Bangalore, India. She enjoys experimenting with Japanese short-forms and myriad found poetry techniques alike. A Best of the Net nominee and award-winning haiku poet, her poems and artwork have appeared in over 200 online and print venues of repute. In addition, she has edited and co-edited over half a dozen international poetry anthologies since 2016. Shloka is the Founding Editor of Sonic Boom and its imprint Yavanika Press. When she isn't poring over manuscripts, you can find her making abstract art, digital collages, or conducting poetry workshops. Shloka is the author of the microchap *Points of Arrival (Origami Poems Project, 2021)*, her debut full-length haiku collection *The Field of Why (Yavanika Press, 2022)*, and the collaborative haiga anthology, *living in the pause (Yavanika Press, 2024)*. Website: www.shlokashankar.com