

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF HAIKU IN THE UNITED STATES

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## The First Wave

America's first haiku, like nearly everyone else's, were translations of Japanese originals, and imitations of those translations. Lafcadio Hearn published the earliest of these translations in 1898, and his versions remain fresh even today. This is possibly the first English-language version of Bashō's famous *furuike ya*:

Old pond—frogs jumping in—sound of water.<sup>1</sup>

Other early translators included William N. Porter

Asleep within the grave  
The soldiers dream, and overhead  
The summer grasses wave.

And Curtis Hidden Page:

All that is left of the dream  
Of twice ten thousand warriors slain.

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1. Lafcadio Hearn, *Japanese Lyrics* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915).

The first fully realized haiku in English is generally acknowledged to be Ezra Pound's

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd :  
Petals on a wet, black bough .

published in *Poetry* in 1913. He termed this a “hokku-like sentence.”<sup>2</sup> It marks the first true integration of haiku sensibility into Western poetics, content, and techniques. Pound's word was built upon and expanded by the Imagists, especially Amy Lowell, English-language haiku's first champion:

Last night it rained.  
Now, in the desolate dawn,  
Crying of blue jays.<sup>3</sup>

Other American Imagists who produced haiku included John Gould Fletcher and Yvor Winters.

Another early proponent of English-language haiku was Sadakichi Hartmann, a friend of and influence on Pound:

White petals afloat  
On a winding woodland stream—  
What else is life's dream!<sup>4</sup>

As other major figures in American poetry became aware of haiku, they tried their hands at it. E. E. Cummings published three “standard” (that is, 5-7-5) haiku in *The Harvard Monthly* in April of 1916, and in 1928 produced this:

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ness<sup>5</sup>

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2. Ezra Pound, “Vorticism,” *The Fortnightly Review* 571 (September 1, 1914): 465–67.

3. *Poetry* (1921).

4. Sadakichi Hartmann, *Tanka and Haikai: Japanese Rhythms* (San Francisco, 1916).

5. *95 Poems* (Harcourt Brace, 1958).

Charles Reznikoff wrote short poems that featured an acerbity and wit:

About an excavation  
a flock of bright red lanterns  
has settled.<sup>6</sup>

Langston Hughes offered one clear example:

*Suicide's Note*  
The calm,  
Cool face of the river  
Asked me for a kiss.<sup>7</sup>

Carl Sandburg wrote short evocative lyrics which partake of the haiku flavor:

WINDOW  
  
Night from a railroad car window  
Is a great, dark, soft thing  
Broken across with slashes of light.<sup>8</sup>

Wallace Stevens never termed anything he wrote haiku, but in 1917 he “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” which became a signature early. Here is the first stanza:

I  
Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird.<sup>9</sup>

William Carlos Williams also adapted haiku to his own purposes, most notably in “The Red Wheelbarrow”:

a red wheel  
barrow  
  
glazed with rain  
water  
  
beside the white  
chickens.<sup>10</sup>

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6. *Jerusalem the Golden* (Objectivist Press, 1934).

7. *Vanity Fair* (25 September 1925).

8. Carl Sandburg, *Chicago Poems* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1916).

9. *Others: An Anthology of the New Verse* (Knopf, 1917).

10. *Spring and All* (Contact Publishing Co., 1923).

Paul Reps was America's first public Buddhist, and produced minimalist haiku and haiga over a career that spanned half a century:

walking through the forest  
I rearrange  
the trees<sup>11</sup>

### **Early Theory and The Beats**

Harold Gould Henderson (1890–1974), a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, published the first serious study of Japanese haiku in English, *The Bamboo Broom*, in 1934, and added *Haiku in English* in 1967. These two volumes offer the first theoretical underpinning for an American haiku. Other prominent figures in popular and academic culture, such as Alan Watts, John Cage, Daisetz Suzuki, and R H Blyth, added to this considerably, affecting most notably the Beats and their poetic descendants.

Kenneth Rexroth, a poet, translator, theorist and literary professor, introduced haiku to Gary Snyder:

This morning:  
floating face down in the water bucket  
a drowned mouse<sup>12</sup>

who in turn introduced it to Jack Kerouac

Missing a kick  
at the icebox door  
It closed anyway<sup>13</sup>

and Allen Ginsberg:

The madman  
Emerges from the movies:  
The street at lunchtime.<sup>14</sup>

Several other Beat poets — Gregory Corso, Lew Welch, Jack Spicer, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Albert Saijo, and Diane DiPrima, among others — have offered their versions of haiku. Some are quite innovative, such as Michael McClure's typographical innovations.

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11. *letters to a friend* (Stillgate Publishers, 1981).

12. *Earth House Hold* (New Directions, 1969).

13. *The Book of Haikus* (Penguin, 2003).

14. *Journals Mid-Fifties 1954-1958* (HarperCollins, 1996).

Another interesting figure who came to terms with haiku in the 1950s is Richard Wright:

In the falling snow  
A laughing boy holds out his palms  
Until they are white.<sup>15</sup>

As the Beats were adopting the genre and bringing it unprecedented exposure in the West, commercial publishers began to find a market for translations of Japanese haiku, such as The Peter Pauper Press series that offered versions that featured a 17-syllable count broken into four lines, the middle two indented, and all in small capitals.

### **Beyond the Beats**

In 1956 Helen Stiles Chenoweth founded the Writers Roundtable of Los Altos, California, which published *Borrowed Water* (1966), the first anthology of haiku written exclusively in English.

The previous year *American Haiku*, the first journal dedicated to haiku outside Japan had been founded in Platteville, Wisconsin by James Bull and Don Eulert. Its first issues included poems by, among others, James W. Hackett

Bitter morning:  
sparrows sitting  
without necks.<sup>16</sup>

O Mabson Southard

The old rooster crows . . .  
Out of the mist come the rocks  
And the twisted pine<sup>17</sup>

and Nick Virgilio

lily:  
out of the water . . .  
out of itself<sup>18</sup>

With the arrival of *American Haiku*, some of the best poets working in ELH became known to a larger public. More journals followed, notably *Haiku Highlights* (Jean Calkins, later Lorraine Ellis Harr, who renamed it *Dragonfly*), *Haiku* (Eric Amann, later William J. Higginson), and *Haiku West* (Leroy Kanterman). All these trajectories were gathered in what became the journal of record, *Modern Haiku* (Kay Titus Mormino, later Robert Spiess, Lee Gurga, Charles

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15. *Haiku: This Other World* (Arcade, 1998).

16. *American Haiku* 1.1 (1963).

17. *American Haiku* 3.1 (1965).

18. *American Haiku* 2.1 (1964).

Trumbull, and Paul Miller). Just about every ELH poet of note has appeared in its pages at one time or another.

Robert Spiess published nearly a dozen collections of his own haiku and two more of his epigrammatic “Speculations:

a round melon  
in a field of round melons  
resting dragonfly<sup>19</sup>

John Wills, perhaps ELH’s greatest nature poet, is arguably the most important figure to emerge in haiku during the late 1960s. In contrast to the earlier American Haiku model, his work argued for the stylistic revolution that has become the norm today: shorter, sharper, with a minimum of adjectives and an emphasis on action:

rain in gusts  
below the deadhead  
troutswirl<sup>20</sup>

Virginia Brady Young studied poetry with Robert Frost, John Ciardi, Mark Van Doren, and others, and arrived at an uncut minimalism:

Vaster  
than the prairie —  
this wind.<sup>21</sup>

William J. Higginson, the most important scholar to emerge within the early movement, was also an innovative poet in his own right:

Holding the water  
held by it —  
the dark mud.<sup>22</sup>

Dedicated haiku journals led directly to the creation of organizations where poets could meet in person. The Haiku Society of America was founded by Harold G. Henderson and Leroy Kanterman in 1968, and published *A Haiku Path* (1994), which documents its history and that of its journal, *Frogpond*. Other early groups include the Western World Haiku Society (Lorraine Ellis Harr, 1972), the Yuki Teikei Haiku Society (Kiyoko and Kiyoshi Tokutomi, 1975), and the North Carolina Haiku Society (Rebecca Rust, 1979). Gatherings on a larger scale followed. The first such event in North America was hosted by Nick Virgilio in Philadelphia in 1971, the second by David Lloyd in Glassboro, New Jersey.

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19. *The Cottage of Wild Plum* (Modern Haiku Press, 1991).

20. *up a distant ridge* (First Haiku Press, 1980).

21. *Circle of Thaw* (Barlenmir House, 1972).

22. *Haiku West* 3.2 (1970).



We should not overlook van den Heuvel's considerable contributions as a poet:

hot day  
the mime leans into a wind  
that isn't there<sup>28</sup>

A variety of other anthologies followed, the most significant of which were the *Third Coast Haiku Anthology* (1978) and *Erotic Haiku* (1983).

### **American Haiku Style**

With the proliferation of journals, organizations, and gatherings, haiku in the United had matured by the last couple of decades of the twentieth century, to the point where it might be argued that an "American style" of haiku had emerged. US poets considered "standard practice" to include a three-line format with short-long-short line lengths, the grouping of the first two lines against the third, or the last two against the first, an uneasy consensus on the usefulness of season words without any agreement that season words were equivalent to *kigo*, and a general concordance that standard poetic devices (assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia, for instance) were acceptable in haiku with some incontrovertible exceptions (overt simile or metaphor, end rhyme).

This formulation of haiku was further codified by the publication of *The Haiku Handbook*, by William J. Higginson and Penny Harter, which specifically endorsed this model as an approximation to "traditional form." Higginson carefully remarked that such a formulation should not be taken as the final word on the matter, but the persuasiveness of his arguments and the ubiquity of such examples to be found in the dedicated journals—and especially in the second revised edition of *The Haiku Anthology*—led many to adopt these practices as their primary form. This normative three-line season-word model was by far the predominant mode, but by the end of the century, perhaps in reaction to the uniformity of this American style, there emerged a range of styles that included one-line, two-line, four-line, and three-vertical-line formats, organic forms, eye-ku, concrete haiku, and much more.

The second revised edition of *The Haiku Anthology* (1986) was bolder in its insistence on the place haiku held in the literary world, and its breadth of poetic styles and content offered a compelling argument for the vitality of the genre. It featured the work of many poets who had not appeared in the first edition, including Martin Shea

terminal.  
one far off and  
and perfect moon<sup>29</sup>

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28. *Modern Haiku* 39.3 (2008).

29. *Seer Ox* 3 (1974).

Marlene Mountain

pig and i spring rain<sup>30</sup>

Alexis Rotella

Late August —  
I bring him the garden  
in my skirt.<sup>31</sup>

Raymond Roseliep

he removes his glove  
to point out  
Orion<sup>32</sup>

Robert Boldman

walking with the river  
the water does my thinking<sup>33</sup>

Peggy Willis Lyles

before we knew its name the indigo bunting<sup>34</sup>

Ruth Yarrow

after the garden party the garden<sup>35</sup>

and Garry Gay

Bird song:  
the color  
of song<sup>36</sup>

among others.

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30. *Frogpond* 2:3-4 (1979).

31. *Wind Chimes* 2 (1981).

32. *Sailing Bones* (Rook Press, 1978).

33. *Walking with the River* (High/Coo Press, 1980).

34. *Blithe Spirit* 2.2 (1982).

35. *Wind Chimes* 7 (1983).

36. *Frogpond* 11.2 (1988).

## Outside the Community

Haiku in African-American culture has a lengthy tradition, first practiced by Lewis G. Alexander and Langston Hughes in the days of the Harlem Renaissance, and later taken up later by Richard Wright, Etheridge Knight

Eastern guard tower  
glints in sunset; convicts rest  
like lizards on rocks.<sup>37</sup>

Julius Lester

As we got  
Closer, the  
Rainbow disappeared.<sup>38</sup>

Lenard D. Moore

late summer  
black men spreading tar  
on the side road<sup>39</sup>

and Sonia Sanchez

say no words  
time is collapsing  
in the woods<sup>40</sup>

as well as Robert Hayden, Amira Baraka, Alice Walker, Rita Dove and Kwame Alexander. Haiku has been practiced by Native American poets as well, most prominently by Gerald Vizenor

After the heavy rains  
So many skies tonight  
Reflecting the moon.<sup>41</sup>

Other Native American poets who have incorporated haiku into their work include Kimberly Blæser, Raven Hail, Mary TallMountain, and Donna Beaver.

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37. *The Essential Etheridge Knight* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986).

38. *Kaleidoscope: Poems by American Negro Poets* (Harcourt Brace, 1967).

39. *Frogpond* 26.2 (2003).

40. *Morning Haiku* (Beacon Press, 2010).

41. *Raising the Moon Vines* (Callimachus Press, 1964).

Haiku has also profited from the work of writers who have secured their primary reputations in other forms or genres. We have noted earlier the contributions of Pound and the Imagists; Stevens, Williams, Cummings, and the Beats, to which we may add Cid Corman

On the brim of a  
brimming stone bowl a  
stone.<sup>42</sup>

John Ashbery

A blue anchor grains of grit in a tall sky sewing<sup>43</sup>

Patricia Donegan

spring wind —  
I too  
am dust<sup>44</sup>

John Martone

daughter waters father weeds their silence<sup>45</sup>

and Billy Collins

Innumerable  
raindrops on the reservoir —  
I stop to count some.<sup>46</sup>

Other American outliers include Ann Atwood, John Tagliabue, A. R. Ammons, Larry Eigner, Richard Wilbur, Charles Henri Ford, and Robert Grenier.

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42. *Nonce* (Elizabeth Press, 1965).

43. *Sulfur* 5 (1981).

44. *Mainichi Daily News* Haiku Contest 1998.

45. *Gaura* (tel-let, 2007).

46. *She Was Just Seventeen* (Modern Haiku Press, 2006).

## American Haiku at the Turn of the Century

Haiku North America (founded by Jerry Ball and Garry Gay and continued now by Gay, Michael Dylan Welch, and Paul Miller) was first held in 1991, and biennially ever since. Its 1999 conference included a celebration of the third revised edition of *The Haiku Anthology*. In this volume a third generation of ELH poets could be seen to be emerging. These included Wally Swist

walking farther into it  
the farther it moves away  
spring mist<sup>47</sup>

Dee Evetts

damp morning  
cash for a journey  
warm from the machine<sup>48</sup>

Lee Gurga

from house  
to barn:  
the milky way<sup>49</sup>

Michael Dylan Welch

after the quake  
the weathervane  
pointing to earth<sup>50</sup>

vincent tripi

The shell I take,  
the shell it takes  
— ebb tide<sup>51</sup>

Christopher Herold

foghorns . . .  
we lower a kayak  
into the sound<sup>52</sup>

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47. *Modern Haiku* 19.3 (1988).

48. *endgrain* (Red Moon Press, 1997).

49. *Frogpond* 17.2 (1994).

50. *Frogpond* 13.1 (1990).

51. *Woodnotes* 9 (1991).

52. Harold G. Henderson Haiku Contest (Haiku Society of America) 1999.

Marian Olson

river's song  
a wounded turtle  
slips into it<sup>53</sup>

Peter Yovu

she slips into  
the ocean the ocean  
slips into<sup>54</sup>

Jim Kacian

the river  
the river makes  
of the moon<sup>55</sup>

Mike Dillon

it doesn't matter  
what I think:  
Milky Way<sup>56</sup>

and John Stevenson

a deep gorge . . .  
some of the silence  
is me<sup>57</sup>

Two other outstanding poets omitted from all three volumes were Paul O. Williams and Charles B. Dickson.

Journals have always played a large role in shaping the style and caliber of published haiku. Journals from the 1990s included *Woodnotes* (Haiku Poets of Northern California), *Mayfly* (Randy and Shirley Brooks), *Hummingbird* (Phyllis Walsh), *South by Southeast* (Kenneth Leibman, Jim Kacian, the Richmond Haiku Group), *ant ant ant ant ant* (chris Gordon), *bottle rockets* (Stanford M. Forrester), *Acorn* (Andrea Missias, Carolyn Hall, Susan Antolin), and *The Heron's Nest* (Christopher Herold, John Stevenson).

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53. National League of American Pen Women Haiku Contest 2003.

54. *Frogpond* 32.3 (2009).

55. *Mainichi Daily News* Haiku Contest 1997.

56. *Modern Haiku* 41.1 (2010).

57. *GEPP0* 19.4 (1996).

## The Current Scene

In the years since the third edition of *The Haiku Anthology*, other poets have naturally emerged as leaders in the field. These include Stanford M. Forrester

cold Aegean sun —  
the temple  
half stone, half shadow<sup>58</sup>

Paul Miller

a line borrowed  
from another poet  
spring rain<sup>59</sup>

Fay Aoyagi

icy rain  
at the bottom of the lake  
a door to yesterday<sup>60</sup>

Cherie Hunter Day

looking up  
rules of punctuation —  
the green hills<sup>61</sup>

Chris Gordon

a lover letter to  
the butterfly gods with  
strategic misspellings<sup>62</sup>

Scott Metz

somewhere  
fireflies are  
eating rhinos<sup>63</sup>

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58. *Paper Wasp* 11.2 (2005).

59. *The Heron's Nest* 12.2 (2010).

60. Daily Haiku, Cornell University Mann Library March 7, 2008.

61. *The Heron's Nest* 8.1 (2006).

62. *Cucumbers Are Related to Lemons* (self-published 2009)

63. *NOON* 5 (2007).

In 1996 Red Moon Press began publishing its annual *Red Moon Anthology*, which culls the best ELH and related material published each year, and in 1999 it began publishing the *New Resonance* series, which showcases emerging talent in English-language haiku. Though international in scope, Americans have supplied a preponderance of their content, featuring such poets as Roberta Beary

all day long  
I feel its weight  
the unworn necklace<sup>64</sup>

Carolyn Hall

windfall apples  
what I think about  
what I think<sup>65</sup>

William Ramsey

slave cemetery  
i scrape the moss to find  
no name<sup>66</sup>

Jack Barry

snow light  
not telling you  
the whole dream<sup>67</sup>

Chad Lee Robinson

full moon —  
all our sounds  
are vowels<sup>68</sup>

and Allan Burns

distant virga  
the ranch dog's eyes  
different colors<sup>69</sup>

This is just a sampling, of course — there are many other American poets doing fine work.

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64. *pocket change* (Red Moon Press, 2000).

65. *Roadrunner* 9.1 (2009).

66. *South by Southeast* 3.1 (1996).

67. *All Nite Rain* (Down to Earth Books, 2008).

68. *The Heron's Nest* 8.4 (2006).

69. *The Heron's Nest* 8.3 (2006).