

This Week's Montage

—*Play Ball*

Comparative Haiku

selected by

Allan Burns

Baseball,” opined the innovative manager Branch Rickey, who broke the color barrier by signing Jackie Robinson, “is a game of inches.” Haiku, one could say, is an art of moments. The two dovetail with surprising ease. For instance: Both are oriented toward the seasons. As sure a sign of spring as the return of avian migrants and the budding of leaves, a new baseball *season* is starting just this week of April 5th. And come October—as the migrants head back south and the leaves change colors and fall to Earth—there will be the ritual drama of a new World Series. Let’s not forget, too: Baseball is played in a *park*. And, oh yes, it is a pastime common to both Japan and the United States. What surprises, then, is not so much the intersection of baseball and haiku as how far back that intersection goes. Shiki, the fourth of four titans in the history of Japanese haiku, is the first haiku poet who wrote a substantial body of baseball haiku—and he died in 1902! In the English-speaking world, it was Beat seer Jack Kerouac who penned the first baseball haiku and a classic at that (“Empty baseball field/—A robin,/ Hops along the bench”). But it was Beat-tutored haiku master Cor van den Heuvel who produced quite possibly our most outstanding body of baseball haiku and senryu. His example has encouraged many others to try to distill the magic of baseball into three lines, including Dan McCullough. Let’s hope this season to witness the scene of his seventh haiku reprinted here.

Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902)

Cor van den Heuvel (b. 1931)

Dan McCullough (b. 1966)

the young grass
kids get together
to hit a ball

long grass
the baseball paths
are white

summer grass
baseball players far off
in the distance

beyond the hedge
they are playing ball
in a withered field

dandelions
the baseball rolled
through them

spring breeze
this grassy field makes me
want to play catch

the trick
to ball catching
the willow in a breeze

baseball cards
spread out on the bed
April rain

dispute at second base
the catcher lets some dirt
run through his fingers

changing pitchers
the runner on first looks up
at a passing cloud

the batter checks
the placement of his feet
“Strike One!”

autumn leaves
scatter across the infield
the pitcher blows on his fingers

pitcher and catcher
head for the dugout
the batter stares at his bat

after the game
a full moon rises over
the left field fence

during
the pop-up
full moon

darkening clouds
the umpire’s voice
quickens

staring in
the closer shakes off
the rain

first lightning
the shortstop
flashes leather

rain delay
puddles on the infield tarp
widening

shooting star...
promptly picked off
second base

above
the bartender’s head
Game 7

all selections from *Baseball Haiku*, edited with translations by Cor van den Heuvel & Nanae Tamura (W.W. Norton & Company, 2007)

Previous Montages

March 22: Spring Is Here
March 29: Frontiers

Next Week's Montage: Spring Migration

Peggy Willis Lyles
Matthew Paul
John Barlow