

HAIKU TECHNIQUES

by Jane Reichhold

In my early years of haiku writing, I easily accepted the prevalent credo being espoused on how to write haiku. This was, sometimes implied and occasionally expressed, as being: if the author's mind/heart was correctly aligned in the "proper" attitude, while experiencing a so-called "haiku moment", one merely had to report on the experience to have a darn-good haiku.

One reason for rejoicing in the acceptance of this view, was that it by-passed the old 5-7-5 barrier crisis. This was certainly a plus for the whole 70s haiku scene as there seemed a danger of the entire movement bogging down in fights, arguments and broken friendships.

Another advantage of this system of defining a haiku was that it bestowed near-religious honor on the author of a passable haiku. No one knew exactly why a particular haiku was 'good' but it was clear from the ku that the author had experienced a moment of enlightenment (or *satori* for the Zen inspired). If the moment was holy and the form fit in with the group's philosophy publishing the ku, the haiku was said to be an excellent one. This happened more often if the person judging the ku was a good friend of the haiku's author.

Another plus for this viewpoint was it allowed endless articles to be written for magazines on the Zen aspects of haiku writing, and even fuzzier articles of how to prepare for, find, recognize, and advertise one's haiku moments. Books were even compiled around this semi-religious idea.

However, many of us, recognized that "haiku moments" were very much like other flashes of inspiration which, when transported into other media, became paintings, stories, dreams or even new color schemes or recipes. And many others shared the frustration of having a truly life-altering moment of insight and then never being able to write a decent haiku that expressed the wonder and majesty of that moment. They would ask, what was wrong with me? Was I not spiritually prepared enough? Was I too common? Too inattentive? Too word-numb? Maybe too many of my Christian beliefs kept me from the Zen nirvana of haiku?

The truth is: probably all of the above can weaken one's ability to write good haiku. Ouch, that hurts. However, I felt rescued when I came across *Aware – a haiku primer* written by hand and illustrated by Betty Drevniok, who was at the time she wrote the book (early 80s I am guessing as it has no date in it), president of the Haiku Society of Canada. Among the many great tips for writing haiku (and obtaining the questionable Zenniness of Zen) I came away with her precept: "Write [haiku] in three short lines using the principle of comparison, contrast, or association." On page 39 she used an expression I had been missing in the discussion of haiku when she wrote: "This technique provides the pivot on which the reader's thought turns and expands." Technique! So there are tools one can use! I thought joyfully.

And I practiced her methods with glee and relative (to me) success and increased enjoyment. Suddenly I could figure out by myself what was wrong with a haiku that failed to jell as I thought it should. I could ask myself if there was a **comparison**, a **contrast** or an **association** between the images and if this relationship was clear and understandable for the reader.

Slowly, over the years, I found by reading the translations of the old Japanese masters and the haiku of my contemporaries whom I admired, that there were more factors than just these three on which one could build a haiku. However, there seemed a disinterest in others wanting to study these aspects which I call techniques. Perhaps this is because in the haiku scene there continues to be such a reverence for the haiku moment and such a dislike for what are called "desk haiku". The definition of a desk haiku is one written from an idea or from simply playing around with words. If you don't experience an event

with all your senses it is not valid haiku material. A ku from your mind was half-dead and unreal. An experienced writer could only smile at such naiveté, but the label of "desk haiku" was the death-knell for a ku declared as such. This fear kept people new to the scene afraid to work with techniques or even the idea that techniques were needed when it came time to write down the elusive haiku moment.

At the risk of leading anyone into the quasi-sin of writing dreaded desk haiku, I would like to discuss and illustrate some of the haiku writing techniques which I have recognized and used. In order to avoid my seeming to accuse others of using techniques, the ku quoted are all my own.

The Technique of Comparison - In the words of Betty Drevniok: "In haiku the SOMETHING and the SOMETHING ELSE are set down together in clearly stated images. Together they complete and fulfill each other as ONE PARTICULAR EVENT." She rather leaves the reader to understand that the idea of comparison is showing how two different things are similar or share similar aspects.

a spring nap
downstream cherry trees
in bud

What is expressed, but not said, is the thought that buds on a tree can be compared to flowers taking a nap. One could also ask to what other images could cherry buds be compared? A long list of items can form in one's mind and be substituted for the first line. Or one can turn the idea around and ask what in the spring landscape can be compared to a nap without naming things that close their eyes to sleep. By changing either of these images one can come up with one's own haiku while getting a new appreciation and awareness of comparison.

The Technique of Contrast - Now the job feels easier. All one has to do is to contrast images.

long hard rain
hanging in the willows
tender new leaves

The delight from this technique is the excitement that opposites creates. You have instant built-in interest in the most common haiku 'moment'. And yet most of the surprises of life are the contrasts, and therefore this technique is a major one for haiku.

The Technique of Association - This can be thought of as "how different things relate or come together". The Zen of this technique is called "oneness" or showing how everything is part of everything else. You do not have to be a Buddhist to see this; simply being aware of what is, is illumination enough.

ancestors
the wild plum
blooms again

If this is too hard to see because you do not equate your ancestors with plum trees, perhaps it is easier to understand with:

moving into the sun
the pony takes with him
some mountain shadow

Does it help for me to explain how this ku came to be written? I was watching some ponies grazing early in the morning on a meadow that was still partially covered with the shadow of the mountain. As the grazing pony moved slowly into the sunshine, I happened to be focused on the shadow and actually saw some of the mountain's shadow follow the pony – to break off and become his shadow. It can also be thought that the pony eating the grass of the mountain becomes the mountain and vice versa. When the boundaries disappear between the things that separates them, it is truly a holy moment of insight and it is no wonder that haiku writers are educated to latch on to these miracles and to preserve them in ku.

The Technique of the Riddle - this is probably one of the very oldest poetical techniques. It has been guessed that early spiritual knowledge was secretly preserved and passed along through riddles. Because poetry, as it is today, is the commercialization of religious prayers, incantations, and knowledge, it is no surprise that riddles still form a serious part of poetry's transmission of ideas.

One can ask: "what is still to be seen"

on all four sides
of the long gone shack

The answer is:

calla lilies

Or another one would be:

spirit bodies
waving from cacti
plastic bags

The 'trick' is to state the riddle in as puzzling terms as possible. What can one say that the reader cannot figure out the answer? The more intriguing the 'set-up' and the bigger surprise the answer is, the better the haiku seems to work. As in anything, you can overextend the joke and lose the reader completely. The answer has to make sense to work and it should be realistic. Here *is* a case against desk haiku. If one has seen plastic bags caught on cacti, it is simple and safe to come to the conclusion I did. If I had never seen such an incident, it could be it only happened in my imagination and in that scary territory one can lose a reader. So keep it true, keep it simple and keep it accurate and make it weird.

Oh, the old masters favorite trick with riddles was the one of: is that a flower falling or is it a butterfly? or is that snow on the plum or blossoms and the all-time favorite – am I a butterfly dreaming I am a man or a man dreaming I am a butterfly. Again, if you wish to experiment (the ku may or may not be a keeper) you can ask yourself the question: if I saw snow on a branch, what else could it be? Or seeing a butterfly going by you ask yourself what else besides a butterfly could that be?

The Technique of Sense-switching - This is another old-time favorite of the Japanese haiku masters, but one they have used very little and with a great deal of discretion. It is simply to speak of the sensory aspect of a thing and then change to another sensory organ. Usually it involves hearing something one sees or vice versa or to switch between seeing and tasting.

home-grown lettuce
the taste of well-water
green

The Technique of Narrowing Focus - This is something Buson used a lot because he, being an artist, was a very visual person. Basically what you do is to start with a wide-angle lens on the world in the first line, switch to a normal lens for the second line and zoom in for a close-up in the end. It sounds simple, but when he did it he was very effective. Read some of Buson's work to see when and how he did this.

the whole sky
in a wide field of flowers
one tulip

The Technique of Metaphor - I can just hear those of you who have had some training in haiku, sucking in your breath in horror. There IS that ironclad rule that one does not use metaphor in haiku. Posh. Basho used it in his most famous "crow ku". What he was saying in other words (not haiku words) was that an autumn evening come down on one the way it feels when a crow lands on a bare branch. I never understood this hokku until one day I was in my tiny studio with the door open. I was standing so still I excited the resident crow's curiosity causing him to fly down suddenly to land about two feet from my cheek on the tiny nearly bare pine branch. I felt the rush of darkness coming close, as close as an autumn evening and as close as a big black crow. The thud of his big feet hitting the bare branch caused the tiny ripple of anxiety one has when it gets dark so early in the autumn. In that

moment I felt I knew what Basho had experienced. It is extremely hard to find a haiku good enough to place up against Basho's rightly famous one, so I'll pass giving you an example of my ku. But this is a valid technique and one that can bring you many lovely and interesting haiku.

The Technique of Simile - Usually in English you know a simile is coming when you spot the words "as" and "like". Occasionally one will find in a haiku the use of a simile with these words still wrapped around it, but the Japanese have proved to us that this is totally unnecessary. From them we have learned that it is enough to put two images in juxtaposition (next to each other) to let the reader figure out the "as" and "like" for him/herself. So basically the unspoken rule is that you can use simile (which the rule-sayers warn against) if you are smart enough to simply drop the "as" and "like". Besides, by doing this you give the reader some active part that makes him or her feel very smart when they discover the simile for him/herself.

a long journey
some cherry petals
begin to fall

The Technique of the Sketch or Shiki's *Shasei* - Though this technique is often given Shiki's term *shasei* (sketch from life) or *shajitsu* (reality) it had been in use since the beginning of poetry in the Orient. The poetic principle is "to depict as is". The reason he took it up as a 'cause' and thus, made it famous, was his own rebellion against the many other techniques used in haiku. Shiki was, by nature it seemed, against whatever was the status quo. If poets had over-used any idea or method his personal goal was to point this out and suggest something else. (Which was followed until someone else got tired of it and suggested something new. This seems to be the way poetry styles go in and out of fashion.) Thus, Shiki hated word-plays, puns, riddles – all the things you are learning here! He favored the quiet simplicity of just stating what he saw without anything else having to happen in the ku. He found the greatest beauty in the common sight, simply said. And 99% of his haiku were written in his style. And many people still feel he was right. And there are some moments which are perhaps best said as simply as it is possible. Yet, he himself realized, after writing very many in this style in 1893, that used too much, even his new idea can become boring. So the method is an answer, but never the complete answer of how to write a haiku.

evening
waves come into the cove
one at a time

The Technique of Double entendre (or double meanings) - Anyone who has read translations of Japanese poetry has seen how much poets delighted in saying one thing and meaning something else. Only insiders knew the secret language and got the jokes. In some

cases the pun was to cover up a sexual reference by seeming to speaking of something commonplace. There are whole lists of words with double meanings: spring rain = sexual emissions and jade mountain = the Mound of Venus, just to give you an sampling. But we have them in English also, and haiku can use them in the very same way.

eyes in secret places
deep in the purple middle
of an iris

The Technique of using Puns - Again we can only learn from the master punsters – the Japanese. We have the very same things in English but we haiku writers may not be so well-versed as the Japanese are in using these because there have been periods of Western literary history where this skill has been looked down upon. And even though the *hai* of haiku means "joke, or fun, or unusual" there are still writers whose faces freeze into a frown when encountering a pun in three lines.

a sign
at the fork in the road
"fine dining"

The Technique of Word-plays - Again, we have to admit the Japanese do this best. Their work is made easier by so many of their place names either having double meaning or many of their words being homonyms (sounding the same). Still (there is one meaning 'quiet' or 'continuation') we have so many words with multiple meaning there is no reason we cannot learn to explore our own language. A steady look at many of our cities' names could give new inspiration: Oak-land, Anchor Bay, Ox-ford, Cam-bridge and even our streets give us Meadowgate, First Street, and one I lived on – Ten Mile Cutoff.

moon set
now it's right – how it fits
Half Moon Bay

The Technique of Verb /Noun Exchange - This is a very gentle way of doing word play and getting double duty out of words. In English we have many words which function as both verbs and nouns. By constructing the poem carefully, one can utilize both aspects of such words as leaves, spots, flowers, blossoms, sprouts, greens, fall, spring, circles and hundreds more. You can use this technique to say things that are not allowed in haiku. For instance, one would not be admired for saying that the willow tree strings raindrops, but one can get away with making it sound as if the strings of willow are really the spring rain manifested in raindrops. This is one of those cases where the reader has to decide which

permissible stance the ku has taken.

spring rain
the willow strings
raindrops

The Technique of Close Linkage - Basically this could come as a sub-topic to association but it also works with contrast and comparison so I like to give it its own rubric. In making any connection between the two parts of a haiku, the leap can be a small and even a well-known one. Usually beginners are easily impressed with close linkage and experiment first with this form. They understand it and feel comfortable using the technique.

winter cold
finding on a beach
an open knife

The Technique of Leap Linkage - Then as a writer's skills increase, and as he or she reads many haiku (either their own or others) such 'easy' leaps quickly fade in excitement. Being human animals we seem destined to seek the next level of difficulty and find that thrilling. So the writer begins to attempt leaps that a reader new to haiku may not follow and therefore find the ku to espouse nonsense. The nice thing about this aspect, is when one begins to read haiku by a certain author, one will find some of the haiku simply leave the reader cold and untouched. Years later, returning to the same book, with many haiku experiences, the reader will discover the truth or poetry or beauty in a haiku that seemed dead and closed earlier. I think the important point in creating with this technique is that the writer is always totally aware of his or her 'truth'. Poets of the surrealistic often make leaps which simply seem impossible to follow (I am thinking of Paul Celan) where the reader simply has to go on faith that the author knew what he was writing about. This is rare in haiku. Usually, if you think about the ku long enough and deeply enough, one can find the author's truth. I know I have quickly read a link in a renga and thought the author was kidding me or had gone off the deep end. Sometimes it is days later when I will go, "Ah-ha!" and in that instant understand what the ku was truly about.

wildflowers
the early spring sunshine
in my hand

The Technique of Mixing It Up - What I mean here is mixing up the action so the reader does not know if nature is doing the acting or if a human is doing it. As you know, haiku are praised for getting rid of authors, authors' opinions and authors' action. One way to sneak this in is to use the gerund (-ing added to a verb) combined with an action that seems sensible for both a human and for the nature/nature to do. Very often when I use a gerund in a haiku I am basically saying, "I am. . ." making an action but leaving unsaid the "I am". The Japanese language has allowed poets to use this tactic so long and so well that even

their translators are barely aware of what is being done. It is a good way to combine humanity's action with nature in a way that minimizes the impact of the author but allows an interaction between humanity and nature.

end of winter
covering the first row
of lettuce seeds

The Technique of *Sabi* - I almost hesitate to bring up this idea as a technique because the word *sabi* has gotten so many meanings over the innumerable years it has been in Japan, and now that it comes to the English language it is undergoing even new mutations. As fascinated as Westerners have become with the word, the Japanese have maintained for centuries that no one can really, truly comprehend what *sabi* really is and thus, they change its definition according to their moods. Bill Higginson, in *The Haiku Handbook*, calls *sabi* – "(patina/loneliness) Beauty with a sense of loneliness in time, akin to, but deeper than, nostalgia." Suzuki maintains that *sabi* is "loneliness" or "solitude" but that it can also be "miserable", "insignificant", and "pitable", "asymmetry" and "poverty". Donald Keene sees *sabi* as "an understatement hinting at great depths". So you see, we are rather on our own with this! I have translated this as: *sabi* (SAH-BEE)- aged/loneliness - A quality of images used in poetry that expresses something aged or weathered with a hint of sadness because of being abandoned. A split-rail fence sagging with overgrown vines has *sabi*; a freshly painted picket fence does not." As a technique, one puts together images and verbs which create this desired atmosphere. Often in English this hallowed state is sought by using the word "old" and by writing of cemeteries and grandmas. These English tricks wear thin quickly.

rocky spring
lips taking a sip
from a stone mouth

or

coming home
flower
by flower

The Technique of *Wabi* - the twin brother to *sabi* who has as many personas can be defined as "(WAH-BEE)-poverty- Beauty judged to be the result of living simply. Frayed and faded Levis have the *wabi* that bleached designer jeans can never achieve." Thus one can argue that the above haiku samples are really more *wabi* than *sabi* – and suddenly one understands the big debate. However, I offer one more *ku* that I think is more *wabi* than

sabi because it offers a scene of austere beauty and poignancy.

parting fog
on wind barren meadows
birth of a lamb

The Technique of *Yûgen* - another of these Japanese states of poetry which is usually defined as "mystery" and "unknowable depth". Somehow *yûgen* has avoided the controversy of the other two terms but since deciding which haiku exemplifies this quality is a judgmental decision, there is rarely consent over which *ku* has it and which one does not. In my glossary I am brave enough to propound: "One could say a woman's face half-hidden behind a fan has *yûgen*. The same face half-covered with pink goo while getting a facial, however, does not." But still haiku writers do use the atmosphere as defined by *yûgen* to make their *ku* be a good haiku by forcing their readers to think and to delve into the everyday sacredness of common things. (In a letter from Jeanne Emrich, she suggests one can obtain *yûgen* by having something disappear, or something appear suddenly out of nowhere, or by the use of night, fog, mist, empty streets, alleys, and houses. Using the sense-switching technique can create an air of mystery because of the information from the from the 'missing' sense.) Some English writers have tried to create *yûgen* by using the word "old" which became so overused there was an outcry against the adjective. Others tried to reach this state by writing about ghosts or 'spooky' subjects which did not impress the Japanese at all. Jeanne's suggestions seem, to me, to bring the writer closer to this goal.

tied to the pier
the fishy smells
of empty boats

The Technique of the Paradox - One of the aims of the playing with haiku is to confuse the reader just enough to attract interest. Using a paradox will engage interest and give the reader much to think about. Again, one cannot use nonsense but has to construct a true (connected to reality) paradox. It is not easy to come up with new ones or good ones, but when it happens, one should not be afraid of using it in a haiku.

climbing the temple hill
leg muscles tighten
in our throats

The Technique of The Improbable World - This is very close to paradox but has a slight difference. Again, this is an old Japanese tool which is often used to make the poet sound simple and child-like. Often it demonstrates a distorted view of science – one we 'know' is

not true, but always has the possibility of being true (as in quantum physics).

evening wind
colors of the day
blown away

or

waiting room
a patch of sunlight
wears out the chairs

The Technique of Humor - This is the dangerous stuff. Because one has no way of judging another person's tolerance for wisecracks, jokes, slurs, bathroom and bedroom references, one should enter the territory of humor as if it is strewn with land-mines. And yet, if one is reading before a live audience nothing draws in the admiration and applause like some humorous haiku. Very often the humor of a haiku comes from the honest reactions of humankind. Choose your terms carefully, add to your situation with appropriate leaps, and may the haiku gods smile on you.

dried prune faces
guests when they hear
we have only a privy

The Above as Below Technique. Seeming to be a religious precept, yet this technique works to make the tiny haiku a well-rounded thought. Simply said: the first line and the third line exhibit a connectedness or a completeness. Some say one should be able to read the first line and the third line to find it makes a complete thought. Sometimes one does not know in which order to place the images in a haiku. When the images in the first and third lines have the strongest relationship, the haiku usually feels 'complete'. For exercise, take any haiku and switch the lines around to see how this factor works or try reading the haiku without the second line.

holding the day
between my hands
a clay pot

This ku is also using the riddle technique.

In searching for these examples, I found so many more of my haiku which did not fit into any of these categories, which tells me there are surely many more techniques which are in use but are waiting for discovery, definition and naming. I stop here, hoping I have given you enough to pique your interest in the quest and new ways of exploring the miracles of haiku.

Blessed be!

