

Haiku Death Match

What you are about to co-create, for your participation is the catalyst for this competition, is rooted in a 16th Century Japanese poetic tradition — Haiku! Legend has it Basho once slide two shells around a table, comparing their shape, color and texture, until the instant one stood out. He used the same technique when choosing which haiku was the most accurate and pleasing. Fast forward centuries to the National Poetry Slam where the Head to Head Haiku Slam was first introduced. From that we present the Haiku Death Match, a tongue in cheek match where the losers will not have to commit “suduko.”

Haiku as a form developed from the starting three line poem of a linked group poem called Renku composed at poetry parties accompanied by copious amounts of Plum Wine. Haiku is poetic form that directly and succinctly renders that moment of coincidence between human and nature. It is akin to sketching a few, specific details of nature to reveal a whole picture and mood; Haiku are all about that moment, the sudden realization :

*on a withered branch
a crow has settled —
autumn dusk* Basho

Haiku are not generalized images of pantheism, or metaphoric emblems of a fallen world as in much of Western “nature” poetry, or symbolic language that illustrates an idea. They are direct and specific natural details expressed in plain language to release a coincidence of essential nature. Haiku notice the unity of disparate elements in juxtaposition, much like metaphor, but suggest that connection in ordinary speech:

*squatting motionless
the sun tanned child and the toad
stare at each other* Buson

In traditional Japanese, the form is fairly rigid and must follow a three line, 5-7-5 syllable (or onji), present tense, specific season format, with a cutting word (verbal pivot) between the second and third lines. However, because syllable in English is much different than onji – for instance the word “moose” in English is one syllable, in Japanese it is three, “moo-oos-eh” — most haiku in English follow a short-long-short line or 2-3-2 beat (stress) structure. So please don't distract yourself by counting syllables.

We are presenting in English, chock full of latinate polysyllables and germanic grunts.

Also, many of the haiku you will hear tonight, until the traditional category bouts, are really senryu, sometimes comic poems on human nature or other subjects. Neither are haiku some facile response where whatever I put down in the moment is a poem. A snapshot observation is not participation. Haiku are not mere pretty descriptions. Traditional Haiku breathe one whole thought, mood, or event revealing nature's transience, and/or unity, and/or suffering. They overlay images into a collage of awareness. The connection to Satori, Zen awakening, is intentional. Cherry Blossoms falling is a spiritual saying, A kind of Ave Maria of Nature if you will. A good haiku will linger in the air like the breath of a crow.