

Good Haibun/Bad Haibun

Defined classically as a “terse prose-poem” yet as practiced, including similar Japanese forms such as the *kiko* (travel journal) and *nikki* (travel diary), the haibun normally had an autobiographical or theoretical interest¹. A more broad definition would be a paragraph or two of disjunct prose with a short bit of verse.

Matsuo Basho’s *Oku-no-hosomichi* (Narrow Path to the Interior, 1694) is a classic of world literature. One of the first examples of this form, considered a classical Japanese form rarely practiced there now. In North America, the Beats may not have been the first to publish haibun, but were responsible for bringing greater awareness of ancient Asian cosmologies and poetics to a larger audience and both Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder were writing haibun in the 50s, though Canadian Jack Cain’s *Paris* (1964) is apparently the first book of haibun published in North America.

Here follow some haibun examples, good and bad, of the form:

1)

The moon and sun are eternal travelers. Even the years wander on. A lifetime adrift in a boat, or in old age leading a tired horse into the years, every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home. From the earliest times there have always been some who perished along the road. Still I have always been drawn by wind-blown clouds into dreams of a lifetime of wandering. Coming home from a year’s walking tour of the coast last autumn, I swept the cobwebs from my hut on the banks of the Sumida just in time for New Year, but by the time spring mists began to rise from the fields, I longed to cross the Shirakawa Barrier into the Northern Interior. Drawn by the wanderer-spirit Dôsojin, I couldn’t concentrate on things. Mending my cotton pants, sewing a new strap on my bamboo hat, I daydreamed. Rubbing moxa into my legs to strengthen them, I dreamed a bright moon rising over Matsushima. So I placed my house in another’s hands and moved to my patron Mr. Sampû’s summer house in preparation for my journey. And I left a verse by my door:

Even this grass hut
may be transformed
into a doll’s house.

2)

In some places a woman would marry a woman which torques the definition of marriage would it be so simple any such definition. For they throw stones at you in the torqued definition of marriage. It hurts to be unkind they say & cast a stone. Or someone had a man take a slug at her on an emotional national holiday because she was a known lover of woman who had a wife. And it was a man’s holiday, a memorial day for dead warriors who are mostly especially in the two wars men. Or maybe she the woman slugged was a wife. This is a two wives tale. It was unseemly to see two women kissing, two women embrace under the primrose tree. Two women in a Lautrec brothel holding the tide together against the slings of men. Caressing against the tide of pimps & other men. Some get murderous in Oregon to see the women, two, shopping together as might a man & wife. Living as do a man & wife in an ordinary man & wife apartment, doing man & wife things. Except at night in the deep dark of night, they said, they who were murderous & dark. What do they do at night? While we are doing our man & wife things, what do they do in the dark of night what do they do?

¹ Ross, Bruce. Journey to the Interior: American Versions of Haibun. Boston, Vernon Press, 1998.

sleep: violent
church: receptor blocked
make love: hippocampus
work: no memory
bicker: memory
gossip: you tell me
breed: have bred will breed
drive: drive
shop: all the brittle streets
repress: dopamine
a dreadful dream: men in skirts
impose: holy evolution
destruction: all around
consumption: cells of a nutritive cycle of animal
(eats plastic, metal etcetera)

3)

Wild roses near the pebble shore - their scent touches each cool stone
and flows over clear water. Forgotten joy returns this misty summer
morning - water holds vapors close until sunlight breaks the gentle
bond of fog. A seagull screeches first light into sky. And then this
breath taken in and exhaled wafts a rose bloom - a few petals fall on
stone. Eyes grasp a perfect pebble: cast it far off, it ripples the mirror
lake - ruffles reflections still in sleep. Awake again all young dreams.

skipping stones
expanding echoes
disappear

4)

Dictionary is oracle bone. No entry falls between devout and devour. And the
three friends? Green enamel teapot, buckskin gloves, sleeping bag of three
decades. Not much has changed. The human heart clings to its trouble, pitch
pine clings to the teapot. Back home I brush up on Sanskrit, look into
Nagarjuna, & try to make sense. I can't quite get it - is he saying the gods
crave recognition? Thunder growls off Indian Peaks; hailstones come
hissing out of the heights. And our scrap of darkness, what of it?

Hips, hiddenness, yours taken, mine given -
rain by the bed
lightning through

thrown open casements

1) Basho Translated by Sam Hamill

(*Narrow Road to the Interior and Other Writings*, a.k.a. *The Essential Bashô*, 1998)

2) - *dark o' night* and - *murderous man & wife things* - Anne Waldman, 2000

3) *Lake Superior* - Dennis Kalkbrenner (*Journey to the Interior: American Versions of Haibun*)

4) *High Up the Thunder Gods, Downstairs the Hunger* - Andrew Schelling, 2008