

A Note from Jim Kacian about contemporary haiku

Jim Kacian is President of the American Haiku Foundation, and in 2023-4 served as the haiku category judge for the Poetry Society of Virginia. He offered the Poetry Society this mini-essay on what any writer intending to work in the field should know about the art of the haiku, as it is best practiced in contemporary English.

We all write out of the traditions with which we are familiar with, how could it be otherwise? And haiku is no exception. But few genres have had such a contorted transition from its culture of origin to its new home in English. Most of its difficulties arose quite early from simple misunderstandings, but they have been codified by subsequent misguided authority, which leaves us with the situation that currently exists.

The “popular conception” of what constitutes a haiku, as still taught in our education systems (when taught at all), and to be found widely promulgated on the internet, reinforces a simplistic and reductive model. It focuses primarily on syllable count, and conflates English-language syllables with Japanese *on*, which is demonstrably false and has been debunked for over a century. It also features an aspect practiced by only the most conservative elements of the genre — not even the Japanese write to this standard any longer. The result is poems that are, by comparison to classical Japanese originals and the best English-language models, overextended and flabby. But even more, this approach bypasses the more significant, if less overt, aspects of the genre: the juxtaposition of, and focus upon, images; the *kire* (cut) which divides these images; the asymmetrical positioning of these images; even the inclusion of a season word (*kigo*, though this is less a standard than it has been in previous centuries); all of which are far more central to the formulation of haiku in all languages than counting syllables.

What today would constitute a traditional approach to haiku in English among those experienced in the genre is a brief (8-12 syllable) poem in one to four, though usually one or three, lines, untitled (a title would be another line, and additional content), with a cut (a caesura that divides the poem into two, usually unequal, parts), and the pairing of (often nature-based) images. More innovative approaches may jettison one or more parts of this, but what remains in all instances is that a poem be brief, composed of images (rather than abstractions or exhortations), and focus on a moment of realization available to both author and reader. This is the standard employed in evaluating haiku by The Haiku Foundation (www.thehaikufoundation.org), the Haiku Society of America (<https://www.hsa-haiku.org/>), and by most other organizations who have made an advanced study of the genre. **It is also the standard adopted by the Poetry Society of Virginia.**