JAPANESE HAIKU

BY
PETER BEILENSON

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A NOTE ON JAPANESE HAIKU

THE hokku—or more properly haiku—is a tiny verse-form in which Japanese poets have been working for hundreds of years. Originally it was the first part of the tanka, a five-line poem, often written by two people as a literary game: one writing three lines, the other, two lines capping them. But the hokku, or three-line starting verse, became popular as a separate form. As such it is properly called haiku, and retains an incredible popularity among all classes of Japanese.

There are only seventeen syllables in the haiku, the first and third lines contain five, the second line seven. There is almost always in it the name of the season, or a key word giving the season by inference. (This is a short-cut, costing the poet only one or two syllables, whereby the reader can immediately comprehend the weather, the foliage, the bird and insect-life—and the emotions traditional to the season: factors which almost always are important in the poem.) But there is also, in a good haiku, more than a mere statement of feeling or a picture of nature: there is an implied identity between two seemingly different things.

The greatest of haiku-writers, and the poet who crystallized the style, was Basho (1644-1694). In his later years he was a student of Zen Buddhism, and his later poems, which are his best, express the rapturous awareness in that mystical philosophy of the identity of life in all its forms. With this awareness, Basho immersed himself in even the tiniest things, and with religious fervor and sure craftsmanship converted them into poetry. He was ardently loved by his followers, and by later poets, and his Zen philosophy has thus been perpetuated in later haiku. It is, indeed, a key to the completest appreciation of most haiku.

Following Basho in time and fame was Buson (1715-1783)—a little more sophisticated and detached than his predecessor, and an equally exquisite craftsman. The third great haiku poet was unhappy Issa (1763-1827), a continual butt of fate. He is less poetic but more lovable than Basho and Buson. His tender, witty haiku about his dead children, his bitter poverty, his
little insect friends, endear him to every reader. Other masters are of course represented here too.

It is usually impossible to translate a haiku literally and have it remain a poem, or remain in the proper seventeen-syllable form. There are several reasons for this. Haiku are full of quotations and allusions which are recognized by literate Japanese but not by us; and are full of interior double-meanings almost like James Joyce. And the language is used without connecting-words or tenses or pronouns or indications of singular or plural almost a telegraphic form. Obviously a translation cannot be at once so illusive and so terse.

In the texture of the poems there is a further difficulty: Japanese is highly polysyllabic. The only way to reproduce such a texture in English is to use Latinized words—normally less sympathetic than the Anglo-Saxon. For all these reasons, the following versions make no pretense to be literal or complete, and some variations in the five-seven-five syllable arrangement have been allowed. Alterations and interior rhymes, which are common in Japanese because every syllable ends with one of the five vowel sounds (sometimes with the addition of the letter "n") have been freely used; but as in the originals, there are no end-rhymes except some accidental ones.

One final word: the *haiku* is not expected to be always a complete or even a clear statement. The reader is supposed to add to the words his own associations and imagery, and thus to become a co-creator of his own pleasure in the poem. The publishers hope their readers may here co-create such pleasure for themselves!
PART 1

In these dark waters
drawn up from my frozen well
...glittering of spring
RINGAI

Standing still at dusk
listen ... In far distances
the song of froglings!
BUSON

I dreamed of battles
and was slain...oh savage samurai!
Insatiable fleas!
KIKAKU

In silent mid-night
our old scarecrow topples down...
Weird hollow echo
BON CHO
Women planting rice...
Ugly every bit about them...
But their ancient song

RAIZAN

Wild geese write a line
flap-flapping across the sky ...
Comical dutch script

SOIN

Dead my old fine hopes
and dry my dreaming but still...
Iris, blue each spring

SHUSHIRI

In this windy nest
open your hungry mouth in vain...
Issa, stepchild bird

ISSA

Ballet in the air ...
Twin butterflies until, twice white
they meet, they mate

BASHO
On the death of his child
dew evaporates and all our world is dew ... So dear,
so fresh, so fleeting

ISSA

Black cloudbank broken
scatters in the night ... Now see
moon-lighted mountains!

BASHO

Seek on high bare trails
sky-reflecting violets...
Mountain-top jewels

BASHO

For a lovely bowl
let us arrange these flowers...
Since there is no rice

BASHO

Now that eyes of hawks
in dusky night are darkened...
Chirping of the quails

BASHO

My two plum trees are
so gracious ... See, they flower
one now, one later
BUSON

One fallen flower
returning to the branch? ... Oh no!
A white butterfly

MORITAKE

Cloudbank curling low?
Ah! The mountain yoshino ...
Cherry cumulus!

RYOTA

Fie! This fickle world!
Three days, neglected cherry-branch ...
And you are bare

RYOTA

Hanging the lantern
on that full white blooming bough...
Exquisite your care!

SHIKI

April's air stirs in
willow-leaves ... A butterfly
floats and balances

BASHO
In the sea-surf edge
mingling with bright small shells ..
Bush-clover petals

BASHO

The river gathering may rains
from cold streamlets for the sea ...
Murmuring mogami

BASHO

A gate made all of twigs
with woven grass for hinges ... 
For a lock ... This snail

ISSA

Wind-blown, rained on ...
Bent barley-grass you make me
narrow path indeed

JOSO

Arise from sleep, old cat,
and with great yawns and stretchings ... 
Amble out for love

ISSA

White cloud of mist
above white cherry-blossoms ...
Dawn-shining mountains
Hi! My little hut
is newly-thatched I see...
Blue morning-glories

In the city fields
contemplating cherry-trees ...
Strangers are like friends

See, see, see! Oh see!
Oh what to say? Ah yoshino ...
Mountain-all-abloom!

Green shadow-dances ...
See our young banana-tree
pattering the screen

Don't touch my plum tree!
Said my friend and saying so ...
Broke the branch for me
Twilight whippoorwill ...
Whistle on, sweet deepener
of dark loneliness

BASHO

Reciting scriptures...
Strange the wondrous blue I find
in morning-glories

KYOROKU

Many solemn nights
blond moon, we stand and marvel...
Sleeping our noons away

TEITOKU

Mountain-rose petals
falling, falling, falling now ...
Waterfall music

BASHO

Amorous cat, alas
you too must yowl with your love...
Or even worse, without!

YAHAG
PART 2

The laden wagon runs
bumbling and creaking down the road...
Three peonies tremble

BUSON

Ah me! I am one
who spends his little breakfast
morning-glory gazing

BASHO

My good father raged
when I snapped the peony...
Precious memory!

TAIRO

By that fallen house
the pear-tree stands full-blooming ...
An ancient battle-site

SHIKI

In the open shop
paperweights on picture books...
Young springtime breeze
KITO

Dim the grey cow comes
mooing mooing and mooing
out of the morning mist

ISSA

Take the round flat moon
snap this twig for handle...
What a pretty fan!

SOKAN

Seas are wild tonight...
Stretching over sado island
silent clouds of stars

BASHO

Why so scrawny, cat?
Starving for fat fish or mice ...
Or backyard love?

BASHO

Dewdrop, let me cleanse
in your brief sweet waters ...
These dark hands of life
Lightning flash, crash...
Waiting in the bamboo grove
see three dew-drops fall

**BUSON**

Ashes my burnt hut ...
But wonderful the cherry
blooming on my hill

**HOKUSHI**

Life? Butterfly
on a swaying grass that's all ...
But exquisite!

**SOIN**

Glorious the moon...
Therefore our thanks dark clouds
come to rest our necks

**BASHO**

What a peony...
Demanding to be measured
by my little fan!

**ISSA**

Under cherry-trees
soup, the salad, fish and all ...
Seasoned with petals
BASHO

Now from cherry-trees ...
Millions of maidens flying
fierce war-lord storm

SADAIYE

Moon so bright for love!
Come closer, quilt... Enfold
my passionate cold!

SAMPU

Too curious flower
watching us pass, met death...
Our hungry donkey

BASHO

Cloud of cherry-bloom ...
Tolling twilight bell ... Temple
ueno? Asakura?

BASHO

Must springtime fade?
Then cry all birds ... And fishes'
cold pale eyes pour tears

BASHO
A nursemaid scarecrow...
Frightening the wind and sun
from playing baby

ISSA

On her dead son
in what windy land wanders now my little dear
dragonfly hunter?

CHIYO-NI

A saddening world:
flowers whose sweet blooms must fall...
As we too, alas...

ISSA

Describe plum-blossoms?
Better than my verses ... White
wordless butterflies

REIKAN

Lend me water please?
Some fresh young morning-glory,
careless ... Took my well

CHIYO-NI

A young sister
pitiful ... On my outstretched palm at dusk dies
the little firefly
KYORAI

You stupid scarecrow!
Under your very stick-feet
birds are stealing beans!

YAYU

Afternoon shower...
Walking and talking in the street:
umbrella and raincoat!

BUSON

In the farther field
a scarecrow kept me company ...
Walking as I walked

SANIN

Pretty butterflies...
Be careful of pine-needle points
in this gusty wind!

SHUSEN

Ah, unrequited love!
Now elevate your chin and keen
tom-cat, to the moon!

KYORAI
Hi! Kids mimicking
cormorants ... You are more like
real cormorants than they!

ISSA

Buzzing the bee trades
peony for peony
with the butterfly

TAIGI

Such utter silence!
Even the crickets’ singing...
Muffled by hot rocks

BASHO

Far across low mist
intermittently the lake
lifts a snow-white sail

GAKOKU

A white swan swimming ...
Parting with her unmoved breast
cherry-petaled pond

ROKA
For a cool evening
I hired the old temple porch ...
Penny in the dish

SHIKI

Quite a hundred gourds
sprouting from the fertile soul...
Of a single vine

CHIYO-NI

Swallow in the dusk...
Spare my little buzzing friends
among the flowers

BASHO
PART 3

Old dark sleepy pool...
Quick unexpected frog
goes plop! Watersplash!

BASHO

My shadowy path
I've swept all day and now ... Oh no!
Camellia-shower!

YAHÄ

Hard the beggar's bed ...  
But sociable and busy
with insect-talking

CHIYO-NI

Come come! Come out!
From bogs old frogs command the dark
and look ... The stars!

KIKAKU

Over the mountain
bright the full white moon now smiles...
On the flower-thief

ISSA
Starting to call you:
come watch these butterflies ...
Oh! I'm all alone

**TAIGI**

Good friend grasshopper
will you play the caretaker
for my little grave?

**ISSA**

A lost child crying
stumbling over the dark fields ...
Catching fireflies

**RYUSUI**

The snake departed
but the little eyes that glared...
Dew, shining in the grass

**KYOSHI**

Ah! Brave dragon-fly ...
Taking for your perch this swatter
consecrate to death

**KOHYO**
I raised my knife to it:
then walked empty-handed on ...
Proud rose of sharon

**SAMPU**

Giddy grasshopper
take care ... Do not leap and crush
these pearls of dewdrop

**ISSA**

Darting dragon-fly ...
Pull off its shiny wings and look...
Bright red pepper-pod

**KIKAKU**

Reply: bright red pepper-pod ...
It needs but shiny wings and look...
Darting dragon-fly!

**BASHO**

Tiny sentences
brushing soft on my shutters...
Bush-clover voices

**SESHI**

Mirror-pond of stars ...
Suddenly a summer shower
dimples the water
SORA

Sadness at twilight...
Villain! I have let my hand
cut that peony

BUSON

In dim dusk and scent
a witness now half hidden...
Evenfall orchid

BUSON

Now be a good boy
take good care of our house ...
Cricket my child

ISSA

Wake! The sky is light!
Let us to the road again...
Companion butterfly!

BASHO

Stillness ... Then the bat
flying among the willows
black against green sky

KIKAKU
Now my loneliness
following the fireworks...
Look! A falling star!

SHIKI

Stupid hot melons...
Rolling like fat idiots
out from leafy shade!

KYORA

For morning-glories
I can foresee grave danger...
Single-stick practice

OHORA

Can't it get away
from the sticky pine-branches ...  
Cicada singing?

GIJOENS

Silent the old town...
The scent of flowers floating...
And evening bell

BASHO

Vendor of bright fans
carrying his pack of breeze...
Suffocating heat!
SHIRI

Voices of two bells
that speak from twilight temples...
Ah! Cool dialogue

BUSON

Deep in dark forest
a woodcutter's dull axe talking...
And a woodcutter

BUSON

Camellia-petal
fell in silent dawn ... Spilling
a water-jewel

BASHO

In the twilight rain
these brilliant-hued hibiscus ...
A lovely sunset

BASHO

Friend, that open mouth
reveals your whole interior...
Silly hollow frog!

ANON
Butterfly asleep
folded soft on temple bell...
Then bronze gong rang!

BUSON

Good evening breeze!
Crooked and meandering
your homeward journey

ISSA

See the morning breeze
ruffling his so silky hair...
Cool caterpillar

BUSON

Oh lucky beggar!...
Bright heaven and cool earth
your summer outfit

KIKAKU

The turnip farmer rose
and with a fresh- pulled turnip...
Pointed to my road

ISSA
Flower in the stream
thus too my lovely life must end, another flower...
To fall and float away

**ONITSURA**

I am going out ...
Be good and play together
my cricket children

**ISSA**

Not a voice or stir ...
Darkness lies on fields and streets
sad: the moon has set

**IMOZENI**
PART 4

Lady butterfly
perfumes her wings by floating
over the orchid

BASHO

If strangers threaten
turn into fat green bullfrogs...
Pond-cooling melons

ISSA

Yellow evening sun ...
Long shadow of the scarecrow
reaches to the road

SHOHA

A camellia
dropped down into still waters
of a deep dark well

BUSON

For the emperor
himself he will not lift his hat ...
A stiff-backed scarecrow

DANSUI
In the holy dusk
nightingales begin their psalm...
Good! The dinner-gong!

BUSON

Live in simple faith ...
Just as this trusting cherry
flowers, fades, and falls

ISSA

Night is bright with stars
... Silly woman, whimpering:
shall I light the lamp?

ETSUJIN

Black desolate moor...
I bow before the Buddha
lighted in thunder

KAKEI

Dirty bath-water
where can I pour you? ... Insects
singing in the grass

ONITSURA
Wee bitter cricket
crying all this sunny day ...
Or is he laughing?

**OEMARU**

A short summer night...
But in this solemn darkness
one peony bloomed

**BUSON**

Long the summer day ...
Patterns on the ocean sand...
Our idle footprints

**SHIKI**

Angry I strode home...
But stooping in my garden
calm old willow-tree

**RYOTA**

Oh do not swat them ...
Unhappy flies forever
wringing their thin hands

**ISSA**

See ... The heavy leaf
on the silent windless day ...
Falls of its own will
BONCHO

Rash tom-cat lover...
Careless even of that rice
stuck in your whiskers

TAIGI

Moon so bright for love!
Oh, hear the farmer by that light...
Flailing his lovely rice!

ETSUJIN

Now the swinging bridge
is quieted with creepers...
Like our tendrilled life

BASHO

Dancing in my silks
money tossed itself away...
Pretty, this paper dress!

SONO-JO

The sea darkening...
Oh voices of the wild ducks
crying, whirling, white

BASHO
White moth, flutter off:
fly back into my breast now
quickly, my own soul!

WAFU

Nine times arising
to see the moon... Whose solemn pace
marks only midnight yet

BASHO

Watching, I wonder
what poet could put down his quill...
A pluperfect moon!

ONITSURA

Do your worst, old frost
you can no longer wound me ...
Last chrysanthemum I

OEMARU

Pebbles shining clear,
and clear six silent fishes...
Deep autumn water

BUSON

A bright autumn moon...
In the shadow of each grass
an insect chirping
BUSON

You turn and suddenly
there in purpling autumn sky ...
White fujiami

ONITSURA

Here, where a thousand
captains swore grand conquest ... Tall
grass their monument

BASHO

Yellow autumn moon...
Unimpressed the scarecrow stands
simply looking bored

ISSA

White chrysanthemum ...
Before that perfect flower
scissors hesitate

BUSON

Cruel autumn wind
cutting to the very bones...
Of my poor scarecrow

ISSA
Now in late autumn
look, on my old rubbish-heap ...
Blue morning-glory

TAIGI

A single cricket
chirps, chirps, chirps, and is still ... My
candle sinks and dies

ANON

Fireworks ended
and spectators gone away...
And how vast and dark!

SHIKI

Two ancient pine-trees ...
A pair of gnarled and sturdy hands
with ten green fingers

RYOTO

I must turn over...
Beware of local earthquakes
bedfellow cricket!

ISSA

Oh! I ate them all
and oh! What a stomach-ache...
Green stolen apples
SHIKI

Now in sad autumn
as I take my darkening path ...
A solitary bird

BASHO

At our last parting
bending between boat and shore...
That weeping willow

SHIKI
PART 5

At furue in rain
grey water and grey sand...
Picture without lines

BUSON

Oh sorry tom-cat
bigger blacker knights of love
have knocked you out!

SHIKO

The old fisherman
unalterably intent...
Cold evening rain

BUSON

While I turned my head
that traveler I’d just passed ...
Melted into mist

SHIKI

Visiting the graves ...
Trotting on to show the way ...
Old family dog

ISSA
Will we meet again
here at your flowering grave...
Two white butterflies?

BASHO

So enviable...
Maple-leaves most glorious
contemplating death

SHIKO

Shocking ... The red of
lacquered fingernails against
a white chrysanthemum

CHIYO-NI

Dry cheerful cricket
chirping, keeps the autumn gay ...
Contemptuous of frost

BASHO

Deepen, drop, and die
many-hued chrysanthemums...
One black earth for all

RYUSUI
Before boiled chestnuts
cross-legged lad is squatting...
Carved wooden Buddha

ISSA

Defeated in the fray
by bigger battlers for love...
Tom-cat seeks a mouse

SHIKO

Asking their road...
Seven yellow bamboo hats
all turned together

ANON

Torches! Come and see
the burglar I have captured...
Oh! My eldest son!

SHIKAN

Autumn mosquitoes
buzz me, bite me ... See, I am
long prepared for death

SHIKI

Nice: wild persimmons...
And notice how the mother
eats the bitter parts
ISSA

Gray marsh, black cloud
flapping away in autumn rain
last old slow heron

ANON

First white snow of fall
just enough to bend the leaves
of faded daffodils

BASHO

What a gorgeous one
that fat sleek huge old chestnut
I could not get at ...

ISSA

None broke the silence...
Nor visitor nor host ... Nor
white chrysanthemum

RYOTA

If you were silent
flight of herons on dark sky ...
Oh! Autumn snowflakes!

SOKAN
Chilling autumn rain...
The moon, too bright for showers, slips from their fingers

**TOKUKU**

Rainy-month, dripping on and on as I lie abed... Ah, old man's memories!

**BUSON**

November sunrise... Uncertain, the cold storks stand... Bare sticks in water

**KAKEI**

From dark windy hills voices driving weary horses... Shouting of the storm

**KYOKUSUI**

Slanting lines of rain... On the dusty samisen a mouse is trotting

**BUSON**

Oh former renter I know it all, all... Down to the very cold you felt
ISSA

Gray moor, unmarred
by any path ... A single branch ...
A bird ... November

ANON

Lonely umbrella
passing the house at twilight...
First snow falling soft

YAHÁ

Carven gods long gone...
Dead leaves alone foregather
on the temple porch

BASHO

Five or six of us
remain, huddled together...
Bent old willow-trees

KYÓRA

Plume of pampas grass
trembling in every wind...
Hush, my lonely heart

ISSA
Tea-water, tired
waiting while we watched the snow...
Froze itself a hat

SOKAN

Cold first winter rain...
Poor monkey, you too could use
a little woven cape

BASHO

Winter rain deepens
lichen letters on the grave...
And my old sadness

ROKA

Cold winter shower ..
See all the people running
across seta bridge!

JOSO

Old weary willows...
I thought how long the road would be
when you went away

BUSON

No oil to read by ...
I am off to bed but ah!...
My moonlit pillow
BASHO

Descending seaward
far-off mountain waterfall...
Winter nights are still

KYOKUSUI

All heaven and earth
flowered white obliterate...
Snow ... Unceasing snow

HASHIN
PART 6

Considerate dogs ...
Stepping off into the snow
as I walk the path

ISSA

But when I halted
on the windy street at twilight...
Snow struck against me

KITO

Call him back! Ah no,
he's blown from sight already...
Fish-peddler in the snow

ANON

Crossing it alone
in cold moonlight... The brittle bridge
echoes my footsteps

TAIGI

Such a little child
to send to be a priestling
icy poverty

SHIKI
Windy winter rain...
My silly big umbrella
tries walking backward

**SHISEI-JO**

Buddha on the hill...
From your holy nose indeed
hangs an icicle

**ISSA**

This snowy morning
that black crow I hate so much...
But he's beautiful!

**BASHO**

Look at the candle!
What a hungry wind it is...
Hunting in the snow!

**SEIRA**

If there were fragrance
these heavy snow-flakes settling...
Lilies on the rocks

**BASHO**
Ah! I intended
never never to grow old ...
Listen: new year's bell!

**JOKUN**

Snow-swallowed valley:
only the winding river...
Black fluent brush-stroke

**BONCHO**

Roaring winter storm
rushing to its utter end ...
Ever-sounding sea

**GONSUI**

Eleven brave knights
canter through the whirling snow...
Not one bends his neck

**SHIKI**

Going snow-viewing
one by one the walkers vanish...
Whitely falling veils

**KATSURI**

"Yes, come in!" I cried...
But at the windy snow-hung gate
knocking still went on
KYORA

See: surviving suns
visit the ancestral grave ...
Bearded, with bent canes

BASHO

The orphan speaks:
the year-end party... I am even envious
of scolded children

ISSA

I gave the greetings
of the bright new year ... As though
I held a plum-branch

SHIKI

On jolly new year's day
my last year's bills drop in
to pay their compliments

ANON

Death-song:
leaf alone, fluttering alas, leaf alone, fluttering ...
Floating down the wind

ANON
Death-song: I have known lovers...
Cherry-bloom ... The nightingale ...
I will sleep content

ANON

Death-song:
fever-felled half-way, my dreams arose to march again...
Into a hollow land

BASHO

Death-song:
three loveliest things: moonlight ... Cherry- bloom ... Now I go
seeking silent snow

RIPPO