
ESSAYS

"THE LENGTH OF A FUDGESICLE"

Brad Bennett

Juxtaposition is vital to the construction of many effective haiku. The reader compares the two parts of the poem presented as a phrase and a fragment. These comparisons are often about similarities and differences in physical properties. Haiku can highlight a variety of properties, such as distance, time, height, width, depth, volume, weight, and speed. One way that haikuists describe these traits is by measuring them. For instance, we can include details like the width of an object or the span of time an action takes. To do so, we use standard units of measurement like inches and hours. On occasion, however, haiku writers create new, surprising, and intriguing ways of measuring that create resonance and metaphor in effective ways.

One of the haiku that originally impelled me to think more deeply about the creative use of measurement as a thematic approach in haiku is this classic by Jane Reichhold:¹

coming home
flower
by flower

Instead of measuring “step by step” or “mile by mile,” Reichhold measures distance or time by the stops she makes to gaze at or smell the flowers along the way. This poem triggered my interest in this particular approach, so I started to note and collect haiku that measure in fresh, creative ways. Here’s a more recent example of a haiku that is similar to Reichhold’s, in that it utilizes a specific, creative, and intriguing way of measuring:

summer walk
the length of
a fudgesicle

*Jacquie Pearce*²

Distance is usually measured in feet, meters, miles, etc. Or in this poem, the distance of the walk could even be measured in city blocks or sidewalk slabs. And time is usually measured in seconds, minutes, hours, etc. But Pearce compares the length of the walk to the length it takes to eat a fudgesicle. She's invented a fun, new, unconventional unit of time or distance: the fudgesicle.

As these two examples suggest, the use of creative ways of measuring takes us into the realm of metaphor. Metaphor is part and parcel of haiku, though not usually in a deliberate, upfront way. Paul O. Williams suggests that haiku utilize “unresolved metaphors.”³ The ultimate metaphor that occurs in a haiku is more within the reader's purview, as they bring their own comparisons, interpretations, and meaning to the poem. In haiku, therefore, we want to venture into the realm of direct metaphor very cautiously. If we use metaphors that are too direct, we leave little dreaming room for the reader. Thus, haiku metaphors are more welcoming if they are more open. The trick is to come up with creative ways of measuring that contain both concrete and metaphoric elements, while still staying somewhat “unresolved.”

Creative ways of measuring in haiku remind me of the way synesthesia works. Synesthesia occurs in haiku when one sensory experience transforms into another. In each of the haiku highlighted in this essay, one typical measuring procedure transforms into another atypical one. Here's an example:

winter night
a couple more inches
of sleep

*John Stevenson*⁴

As we read this haiku, we first think of the accumulation of snow. It's winter, and when we talk about “more inches” during wintertime, we're

referring to inches of snow. But during the course of the haiku, those inches of snow transform into inches of sleep. Inches of sleep becomes a metaphor for minutes of sleep.

So, what counts as a new and creative way of measuring? Some successful haiku can refer to acts of measurement, but they are not metaphorical, as in this haiku:

deep winter
I dump warm laundry
up to your smile

*Brad Bennett*⁵

While this may be a freshly described experience, it refers to an instance of concrete visual measurement, not a metaphoric one. The reader can visualize a pile of laundry as tall as a person's smile, but the measurement doesn't make a leap into another realm. Nor does it create a new unit or standard of measure.

Contemporary English-language haiku poets have invented a wonderful variety of new standards of measure. Let's take a look at some examples. I have categorized them by what I think is their primary measure. The first two have to do with distance, the following two measure time.

country mile
the distance it takes
to make a bouquet

*Bryan Rickert*⁶

the distance between
my attic and the moon —
April rain

*Chen-ou Liu*⁷

hanging over us
an icicle
the length of March

*Kristen Lindquist*⁸

the span
of a summer's day
daddy-long-legs

*Roland Packer*⁹

As you can see, distance and time are often interrelated, in haiku and in science. For instance, a light year is a unit of measure equivalent to the distance that light travels in one year. Distance and time interact closely in the following two poems, vying for prominence.

our drive
to the coast
three hawks long

*Brad Bennett*¹⁰

a misunderstanding the length of the kitchen table

*Donna Kaplan*¹¹

Let's explore some other measurements. What about height, width, and depth? In the following two haiku, we encounter two fresh new units of measurement: "sunflowers" and "shrieks."

seventh summer
we measure his height
in sunflowers

*Lorraine A. Padden*¹²

window cracked
the width
of a hawk's shriek

*Tanya McDonald*¹³

Sometimes, a haiku that appears to measure in typical ways actually yields a second reading that is more freshly metaphoric:

winter hike
four layers in
the itch

*Julie Schwerin*¹⁴

When we think of layers, we think of depth. But this poem can be read in multiple ways. First, "winter hike / four layers in" could be a metaphor for distance. Second, the itch is buried under four layers of clothing, perhaps a base layer, a couple of middle layers, and an outer coat. Thus, the itch is "four layers in." But one could also read those last two lines as describing a particular itch with four layers to it. Perhaps it starts off as barely noticeable, then progresses to mildly irritating, then to blatantly annoying, and finally to painfully burning. It's a four-alarm itch!

We can also measure volume and weight. In the following haiku, time is measured in quarts.

berry picking...
 my mornings
 measured in quarts

*Julie Schwerin*¹⁵

Weight is a more common measurement in haiku, perhaps the third most common after time and distance. In the following two examples, the first haiku starts off by considering how we measure a season and offers up a new protocol for calculating its weight. The second begins by measuring the weight of clover blossoms, but then, in the last line, crosses over into sound. So, we end up measuring weight in terms of sound units of beebuzz. This one certainly has a very synesthetic feel to it.

spring's measure
 the lake ice holding up
 two geese

*Kristen Lindquist*¹⁶

drowsy afternoon
 clover heads heavy
 with beebuzz

*Michele Root-Bernstein*¹⁷

Because haiku that utilize fresh ways of measuring are, in fact, newly invented and often wide open, the reader can interpret the new measurement procedures or standards however they like. Here's an example of measuring speed that yields multiple possible interpretations.

my day off to the speed of morning glories

*Peter Newton*¹⁸

There is plenty of room here for the reader—for instance, they get to determine the speed of morning glories on their own. The speed at which morning glories grow is relative, so the reader might determine that morning glories take a long while to grow their blossoms. Or each blossom takes a while to open and close. Or the reader might think that morning glories grow more quickly than other flower species. Or perhaps the speed that Newton refers to is the very slow, deliberate, meditative speed of enjoying a day off, observing morning glories, and being inspired to write about them.

Most of the examples so far highlight simple measurements (though their interpretations aren't simple). But one could go a step further and plug those measurements into formulas for calculation. Some poets explore creative ways of calculating measurements like area and circumference.

frozen branches
measure the emptiness —
winter sunset

Lee Gurga ¹⁹

under the poplar
two cows' worth
of shade

Carolyn Hall ²⁰

the circumference
of a redwood tree
a circle of friends

Brad Bennett ²¹

Here are two more poems that explore fresh methods of calculation.

spring haze
the calculus
of daylilies

Carolyn Hall ²²

dingo call by dingo call the terrain takes shape

Lorin Ford ²³

In Hall's haiku, spring haze is being measured using some kind of formula. We wonder who is doing the calculations, the daylilies or the person viewing the daylilies. In Ford's haiku, the fragment "dingo call by dingo call" is not in and of itself a new way of measuring something, especially if the poem stays in the realm of sound. But by suggesting that the calls are shaping the terrain, the poet creates a new metaphoric way of calculating the layering of land by dingo calls over time.

Some haiku feature even more inventive and intuitive ways of measuring. In the following example, Schwerin offers up a unit of measurement, "one father long," that could mean many things. Plenty of room for the reader to interpret in whatever way makes sense to them.

wild mustard
my daughter's idealism
one father long

*Dan Schwerin*²⁴

Sometimes, a poet can suggest the use of standard units of measurement, but juxtapose them with something fresh and unexpected that creates a new way of thinking about measuring, as in the following haiku:

lightning
we measure the lengths
of our scars

*Raquel D. Bailey*²⁵

In Bailey's haiku, the reader might picture two people measuring their scars together, perhaps with rulers, perhaps in inches or centimeters. But Bailey starts the haiku off with the word "lightning," thus offering it right up front as a unit of measurement that can be applied to the rest of the poem. The scar, or the traumatic event, could be one "lightning bolt" long, or could have occurred a "lightning bolt" ago. Or perhaps the unit of measure is the time between the lightning and its resultant thunder.

Because these writers have used unconventional standards of measurement and calculation, these haiku are fresh, surprising, and thought-provoking. Hopefully, these new measurement units will catch on—we'll start measuring other objects by shrieks, fudgesicles, morning glories, and fathers. Believe it or not, it is within the realm of possibility. There is a famous standard of measure called the "smoot," a unit of length created as part of an MIT fraternity pledge prank to measure the Harvard Bridge. One smoot was equal to the height of Oliver Smoot (5 feet 7 inches), who lay down repeatedly all the way across the bridge as his classmates counted along. But haiku poets don't need pranks to invent intriguing new measurements. All we need is "two cows' worth" of creativity.

NOTES

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¹ Ball, Jerry, Garry Gay, and Tom Tico, Eds. *The San Francisco Haiku Anthology*. Windsor, CA: Smythe-Waithe Press, 1992.

² Latham, Jessica Malone, Ed. *Another Trip Around the Sun: 365 Days of Haiku for Children Young and Old*. Taylorville, IL: Brooks Books, 2019.

³ Williams, Paul O., "The Question of Metaphor in Haiku." *The Nick of Time*. Foster City, CA: Press Here, 2001, p.85.

⁴ *This Once*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2023.

⁵ *Cattails*, October 2018.

⁶ *Akitsu Quarterly*, Spring 2021.

⁷ *Frogpond* 33.2.

⁸ *Tinywords* 22.2.

⁹ *The Heron's Nest* 15.3.

¹⁰ *Wales Haiku Journal*, Spring 2018.

¹¹ *Whiptail* 7.

¹² *Tinywords* 21.2.

¹³ *Hedgerow* 142.

¹⁴ *Modern Haiku* 49:3.

¹⁵ *Bottle Rockets* 32.

¹⁶ *Seashores* 4.

¹⁷ Mason, Scott. *The Wonder Code*. Chappaqua, NY: Girasole Press, 2017.

¹⁸ *Acorn* 41.

¹⁹ Brooks, Randy M., Ed. *Fresh Scent: Selected Haiku of Lee Gurga*. Taylorville, IL: Brooks Books, 1998.

²⁰ *Acorn* 50.

²¹ Save Our World Haiku Contest 2020, *Lyrical Passion Poetry* E-zine.

²² *Calculus of Daylilies*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2017.

²³ *The Heron's Nest* 15.3.

²⁴ Gurga, Lee & Scott Metz, Eds. *Haiku 2022*. Champaign, IL: Modern Haiku Press, 2022.

²⁵ *Simply Haiku* 6.4.