
ESSAYS

A CHALLENGE TO TRY FIXED-FORM HAIKU

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A major benefit to a poet attempting a fixed form in writing haiku is that inspiration can arise from working with boundaries. As Twyla Tharp advises in *The Creative Habit*:

Giving yourself a handicap to overcome will force you to think in a new and slightly different way.¹

Similarly, Liz Lerman's insight into the value of "limitation":²

Think inside the box: Let limitation spark inspiration.³

Tharp and Lerman each advocate for structure's potential as a partner in creativity. Their advice is relevant to haiku poets working with a "handicap" or "limitation" of fixed form. Attempting to write well in fixed form can give you a chance to be "Rattling around in other people's universes" and discovering "unexpected connections, unexpected juxtapositions."

Another benefit of form is that it can be "an integral part of haiku, supporting, reinforcing, and amplifying meaning" as Patricia J. Machmiller advocates in her essay "Jewel in the Crown: How Form Deepens Meaning in English-Language Haiku."⁴ She starts with the traditional 575-syllable form. Her first example shows Deborah P. Kolodji's haiku about a "confinement ... reinforced by the feeling that the words themselves are being confined by the form." Discussing a poem of her own, Machmiller comments how she uses a line break "forced by the form" as an

opportunity to divide the word "barest" into "bare-/est" as "a physical representation of an abstract idea" of an edge or cusp in time that the poem embodies.⁵ Machmiller later gives examples by J. W. Hackett, Richard Wright, and others to illustrate a further aspect of the 575-syllable form: "The grace and balance of this form [can] give the poem a feeling of formality that enhances a meditative or philosophical quality."

In light of such advice, the conscious writing of haiku in form might enhance a poet's writing practice. Rather than dismissing fixed form, we can benefit from exploring it through some of the workshop techniques below.

A side benefit of strengthening one's haiku muscles by using form is a growth of ability to observe rules and follow them accurately. This could help with contest submission chances where fixed forms are required. When I coordinated the Yuki Teikei Haiku Society's 2013 Tokutomi fixed-form haiku contest, I discarded a quarter of all submitted poems because they failed to meet the contest rules.⁶ The tools below might help a poet's work survive such screening.

EXERCISES FROM A FIXED-FORM HAIKU WORKSHOP

In 2017 I led twenty haiku poets in a fixed-form haiku workshop. We explored exercises designed to help create haiku suitable for the Tokutomi Haiku Contest, whose rules require each entry to have a 575-syllable count and a single kigo (season word) taken from a short contest-prescribed list.⁷

Below are the four exercises (some illustrated by contest winners) that I gave participants. The first exercise is an open-ended discussion. While this can be done solo, the twenty poets in our workshop benefited from each other's mullings and insights. Readers are encouraged to reach out to other poets likewise. The rest of the exercises are timed writings. A time limit nudges a poet to keep the hand moving without pausing for internal criticism or worry (see Natalie Goldberg⁸ among many). Internal concerns often arise from dwelling on imagined past and future failures. You can potentially overcome such ideas by simply staying in the present, moving your pen over the page to write for a finite time. Another concern might arise from a need to do things without making a mistake.

Conquer that by realizing there is no wrong way to do a timed writing: simply write any words for the given time. Your goal is to produce quantity. It is irrelevant that you might later find it all banal or bizarre or radiant with rubies.

Before the exercises, we warmed-up with self-introductions during which participants who had placed in past contests read their haiku and commented on their inspiration. Winning poems tend to show strong and original imagery. Haiku with seventeen English syllables are spacious. Many poets use this room to juxtapose images often in comparison or in contrast. Other successful haiku enter deeply into a single rich experience such as:

drying persimmons —
 this deepening of color
 so deliberate

Alison Woolpert (2003 second place)

Woolpert says that this visual and tactile poem arose from her experience drying whole peeled persimmons that she dangled from their stems in a window for several weeks. Its terrific sounds, including the "d" in each line, help the poem feel good in the mouth like persimmons.

EXERCISE 1 - EMOTIONAL RESPONSE.

The first exercise is to limit the topics to a few words and then to recognize emotional responses to each of them. You might select from what you see and touch, hear and smell. Alternatively you might self-assign intriguing topics from memory (such as the comfort foods of mom and pop's home cooking) or from the day's news (such as the distress of world politics). From about a dozen kigo or topics, select one or two that intrigue you. What emotional response does each arouse? Joy? Curiosity? Poignancy?

In the workshop, its orientation to the Tokutomi Contest let me use the Contest kigo as a ready-made list. For 2017 the kigo included tadpole (a spring kigo that aroused smiles and thoughts of childhood), flea (a summer kigo with a pronounced "yuck" factor for many participants),

and harvested fields (an autumn kigo that evoked in some the satisfaction and joy of harvest time and elicited in others a wistful sense of completion and shutting down). We moved through the kigo and shared our varied responses.

EXERCISE 2 - BUILD A ONE-LINE PHRASE IN TWO MINUTES.

The second exercise is to build a line of the length required by the format. Do this by adding syllables to any kigo or topic that you selected above. With a time limit of two minutes make as many five-syllable and seven-syllable phrases as you can.

An example of a five-syllable phrase from the second-place winner of the 2016 Tokutomi contest is Ferris Gilli's augmentation of a contest kigo "dragonfly" to form her closing five-syllable line: "of dragonfly wings."^{9,10} An example of a seven-syllable phrase is (from the third-place winner of the 2013 contest) Roberta Beary's augmentation of a kigo "grasshopper" to form her seven-syllable line: "faint voice of a grasshopper."¹¹

In the workshop's two minutes, participants constructed as many and as varied target phrases as they liked.

EXERCISE 3 - JUXTAPOSE IMAGES IN THREE MINUTES.

Juxtaposition has long been a powerful tool for enriching poetry, whether using the techniques of word link and content link or more subtle links such as "transference, reverberation, scent, or status."¹² When you try this third exercise, select one of the phrases you created in the second exercise and set a new image beside it. Then, write a different image to accompany your chosen phrase. When you wish, choose another of those phrases and add a variety of images to pair it. Continue until you have created as many pairs as possible within three minutes.

Note that this exercise does not have the goal of writing a complete haiku. The focus is on the association of images to create many varied juxtapositions. As a sub-goal for the 575-syllable form, try to make lines of five and seven syllables.

While the technique of comparison (allowing the parts to augment and reinforce each other) is widely used, for this exercise try something less common by thinking in terms of contrasts (offering phrases in

opposition). Interesting contrasts include size and distance and origin, such as these examples in the 2016 Tokutomi Contest's honorable mentions: Meik Blöttenberger juxtaposed "dragonfly" with "spin of the earth" and Phillip Kennedy juxtaposed "Orion" with "shortwave radio."

The following delicate and poignant first-place winner in the 2016 Tokutomi Contest displays great contrasts of abundance and paucity and of beginnings and endings:

flowering dogwood —
 mother's belongings all fit
 into one suitcase

*Priscilla Lignori (2016 first place)*¹³

In telling how she came to write this well-received haiku, Lignori writes:

My mother passed away last year at the time when Japan's flowering trees were coming into full bloom. During her last few years, my mother lived in a nursing home in the Bronx where few of her belongings were allowed to come with her.... I came up with a number of other flowering dogwood haiku.... When I finally was ready to complete the batch to send, I went over the kigo again, and when I thought of the flowering dogwoods and the abundance of blossoms they held, my mother's image came to mind and how all her belongings fit into one suitcase. It was as simple as that. That the dogwood can represent renewal and new beginnings had not consciously occurred to me at the time, just the contrast.¹⁴

I invited poets in my workshop to juxtapose images of contrast. They could emulate the examples of size or shape or departure/arrival or abundance/scarcity. Or they could find new contrasts such as darkness/brightness. After three minutes, the variety of the shared juxtapositions was considerable. They were often written in lines of five and seven syllables, and thus were two-thirds of the way to a complete haiku but without the pressure to create one yet.

**EXERCISE 4 - A THREE-MINUTE HAIKU "DASH TO THE KIGO" IN
THE LAST LINE.**

The fourth exercise is to construct a complete haiku (at last!), with the proviso that the kigo goes not appear until the final line. A closing kigo allows the reader freedom to experience the poem before alighting on the season. This is in contrast with an opening kigo, which is much more common¹⁵ and which might settle the reader too soon in time and space and emotion.

Given that your goal is to conclude with a line that includes a kigo, look at the results of the second exercise for your possible third line. Then look at the third exercise, where you created juxtapositions. Develop the non-kigo part of your juxtaposition into the first (five-syllable) and second (seven-syllable) lines.

To keep the process moving if you get stuck in the first line, introduce a non-visual sense such as a sound (a roar or a rustle, a hiss or a crackle or a creak). If you get stuck in the second line, you might use a consonant or vowel from the first line to bring to mind some apt words with that sound.

Once you have your complete haiku, reconsider the final line. Substitute in turn each of the other five-syllable phrases you created in the second exercise. You might find that you created a haiku where a different candidate could be more successful.

Usually you work alone to complete such an exercise. However, in the workshop, I asked people to write an opening line and then pass it to the poet on their left in our circle. The next poet wrote the second line and passed the resulting two lines to their left. The third poet wrote the final line. This relieved each poet of creating a complete poem, but allowed each to have the experience of writing three separate lines in three different poems. The results could delight and surprise the participants, as with:

Yosemite road	(Karina M. Young)
all the way to Glacier Point	(Alison Woolpert)
a long line of fleas	(Dyana Basist)

This haiku leverages the third exercise by including a contrast of size (the spaciousness of Glacier Point overlooking Yosemite Valley versus the minuteness of fleas no matter how long their line). The quickly written poem is in the 575-syllable form, as were many of the other workshop haiku, supported by the participants' intentions to explore the 575-syllable form and their doing so in the earlier exercises.

When you try this exercise solo, if your poem is unsatisfactory (perhaps lacking in surprise), at least you have a failed haiku that you might later resuscitate. In this context, Jane Reichhold's rule from her essay "Haiku Rules that Have Come and Gone" is consoling: "Write down every haiku that comes to you. Even the bad ones. [They] may inspire the next one which will surely be better."¹⁶

Inspiration for something better might come immediately if you look at your kigo list at hand or at your preferred saijiki. Find a kigo that has the resonance you want and substitute it into the last line. If the syllable count is not the target of five syllables, you can return to the second exercise for two minutes to develop some appropriate-length phrases; then substitute the one you prefer.

COMPLETE HAIKU

When I quoted a haiku phrase in the workshop, participants immediately asked for the full poem so they could hear how a referenced phrase contributed to haiku success. Therefore I include the full haiku here.

Ferris Gilli's second-place winner of the 2016 Tokutomi Contest:

river baptism
the brief cellophane rustle
of dragonfly wings

Roberta Beary's third-place winner of the 2013 contest:

open cellar door
faint voice of a grasshopper
lulls baby to sleep

Meik Blöttenberger's 2016 honorable mention:

blue-green dragonfly
racing against its shadow
how slow the earth spins

and Phillip Kennedy's:

hisses and crackles
on the shortwave radio
Orion aloft

ADAPTATION OF EXERCISES TO OTHER FORMS

The exercises for the 575 fixed-form haiku workshop can be easily adapted for those who prefer a different form. To warm up, poets wanting a different option could prime their writing pumps by reading a book, journal, or anthology by haiku poets writing in a preferred style.

For Exercise 1 (Emotional response), instead of using a contest list, chose season words or non-seasonal topics from what you experience on a walk, whether in a craggy wilderness, on a suburban sidewalk, or in a high-decibel urban center. A homebound poet can collect words and topics from journals, books, the web, newspapers, radio, or TV. Once a list of a dozen items is assembled, take the time to acknowledge your emotional response to each of them. If the emotional responses are all similar, you might gain variety by consciously selecting additional topics that invoke other emotions.

For Exercise 2 (Build a one-line phrase), if you prefer to try a different fixed form than a 575 format, consider Machmiller's modified traditional (syllabic) form with a 464-syllable or a 353-syllable format. For example, for a 464 form, you would add syllables to make four-syllable or six-syllable lines.

You might also explore the "modified modern (accented)" form, which "counts accents or stresses: two stresses in the first line, three in the second, and two in the third."¹⁷ If so you would create phrases that have two stresses or three. For a free-verse haiku, you would probably let the

material dictate the size of each phrase, which will still be brief, perhaps only one or two words. Remember to do this as a timed exercise.

For Exercise 3 (Juxtapose images), irrespective of your target form, try to create contrasts (offering phrases in opposition) if you usually create comparisons (allowing the parts to augment and reinforce each other). Create comparisons if you usually create contrasts. Again this is a timed exercise.

For Exercise 4 (Dash to completion), when you write outside a workshop you usually create each haiku alone. With a three-minute time limit, you could try your material in different forms. In half-an-hour you could even create ten new haiku, one of which will hopefully surprise and impress you.

OUTCOME

Fixed form can be a new way to approach and augment the presentation of your preferred material. Poets that have not worked with form for years, perhaps not since high school, have no doubt developed many haiku skills since then. You can potentially benefit from applying those skills within the boundaries of fixed-form haiku, leveraging opportunities to think in new and different ways. Fixed form is challenging but rewarding. I encourage you to revisit it.

Participants in the workshop were very enthusiastic about having the fixed-form process broken down into small and manageable steps. Many of them planned to create haiku of sufficient caliber to enter into the Tokutomi contest. I look forward to seeing their names in contest results.

NOTES

¹ Tharp, Twyla. *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster (2003).

² Lerman, Liz. "Seven Ways to Be Creative" (2008) at <https://hanvnah.wordpress.com/2008/07/15/liz-lerman-seven-ways-to-be-creative>. Accessed July 1, 2017. In-

troduced to Lerman's work through Michele Root-Bernstein. "Copying to Create: The Role of Imitation and Emulation in Developing Haiku Craft," *Modern Haiku*, 48.1 (2017), pp. 23-42.

³ Lerman, Liz. *Hiking the Horizontal: Field Notes from a Choreographer*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press (2011), p. 239.

⁴ Machmiller, Patricia J. "Jewel in the Crown: How Form Deepens Meaning in English-Language Haiku," *Frogpond*, 36:2 (2013), pp. 96-108.

⁵ maple on the edge
of the garden at the bare-
est edge of turning

Machmiller, Patricia J. *Modern Haiku*, 33.1 (2002).

⁶ Zimmerman, J. "When the Moon Can Stand Alone: Single Kigo and the Tokutomi Contest," *Above the Clouds: Yuki Teikei Haiku Society Members' Anthology* (2013). Reprinted at www.youngleaves.org. Accessed July 1, 2017.

⁷ Tokutomi Contests at www.youngleaves.org. Accessed July 1, 2017.

⁸ Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones*. Boston, MA: Shambhala (1986).

⁹ Gilli, Ferris. See 2016 Tokutomi Contest Results at www.youngleaves.org. Accessed July 1, 2017.

¹⁰ Zimmerman, J. "Inspiration by Past Winners of the Tokutomi Memorial Haiku Contest," *GEPP*, 42:1 (2017).

¹¹ Beary, Roberta. See 2013 Tokutomi Contest Results at www.youngleaves.org. Accessed July 1, 2017.

¹² Shirane, Haruo. "Chapter 4. The Art of Juxtaposition: Cutting and Joining" in *Traces of Dreams* (1998). Particularly p. 85.

¹³ Lignori, Priscilla. See 2016 Tokutomi Contest Results at www.youngleaves.org. Accessed July 1, 2017.

¹⁴ Lignori, Priscilla. Personal email, 1/28/2017.

¹⁵ I counted that in the ten years from 2007 to 2016, about 60% of Tokutomi Contest prize-winning haiku (as reported at www.youngleaves.org, accessed July 1, 2017) placed the kigo in the first line, while 30% placed it in the last. Relatively few (10%) placed it in the middle line.

¹⁶ Reichhold, Jane. "Haiku Rules that have come and Gone: Take your Pick" at www.aha.poetry.com/HAIKU.HTM#comego. Accessed July 1, 2017.

¹⁷ Machmiller, Patricia J. *Ibid.* p. 101.